



# **The Rush Effect:**

## **An Analysis of Political Entertainer Rush Limbaugh**

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## Chapter One: Introduction

There is an Arabian proverb that posits that a man who has powerful enemies is a powerful man - meaning that a person's opponents reflect his or her standing in society. During his twenty-four years on the national airwaves, two presidents and many others have tried to silence conservative radio talk show host Rush Limbaugh. None have been successful. Former President Bill Clinton complained during his presidency that Limbaugh had a three hour daily radio show through which he could spread his populist message, whereas President Barack Obama tried to pit Limbaugh up against his own, the Republican Party, during his first week in office. Limbaugh thrived on the controversies that have followed him. While he at times appears to be his own worst enemy, Limbaugh always seems to come out on top.<sup>1</sup> Other politicians have been more welcoming. Late President Ronald Reagan sent him two letters in the first half of the nineties, saying "keep up the good work," and former Presidents Bush Sr. and Bush Jr. have both made appearances on Limbaugh's radio show.<sup>2</sup>

For nearly the last quarter of a century Rush Limbaugh has been the most listened to radio host in America. Broadcasting media have continued to develop in a fast pace with the introduction of Internet - competitors have come and gone - but nothing or no one has yet to rock Limbaugh's position. There has been no lack of scandal surrounding him, but as long as he keeps the crowds laughing, they stick with him. Media scholar Jeff Land asked in his essay "Sitting in Limbaugh" if it was possible to puncture Limbaugh's balloon by measuring him by his own

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<sup>1</sup>Roger Smith, "After 24 Years, Limbaugh's Influence Continues to Grow," *Los Angeles Times*, August 4, 2012, accessed August 5, 2012. <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/aug/04/news/la-pn-after-24-years-limbaughs-influence-continues-to-grow-20120803>

<sup>2</sup> Paul D. Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 170; Andrew Seifter, "President Bush Was a Guest on His 'Good Friend' Rush Limbaugh's Show," *Mediamatters.org*, August 31, 2004, accessed September 6, 2012. <http://mediamatters.org/research/2004/08/31/president-bush-was-a-guest-on-his-good-friend-r/131765>

ethical standards?<sup>3</sup> Well, neither the admission of long term drug use, nor a criminal investigation hurt Limbaugh's listenership. On the contrary, it strengthened his status as his followers' empathetic counselor.

Rush Limbaugh is part of a Republican clan seated in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. Many of his family members hold prominent social positions. Limbaugh echoes his family's political doctrines, and rhetorically sounds like the rest of the Limbaughs. Both his grandfather and his father were lawyers. Limbaugh was expected to follow the same route, but much to the dismay of his family, Limbaugh dropped out of college after one year to pursue a career as a disc jockey. Limbaugh spent a decade getting fired from different radio stations, until he, according to himself, was finally allowed to be himself in the mid-1980s. He became nationally syndicated in 1988, and has after that, by all accounts, been very successful.<sup>4</sup>

Rush Limbaugh dominated the cultural and political landscape of the mid-1990s. For a while, Limbaugh was everywhere with a high profile radio show, a nightly cable network television show, two bestselling books, a monthly newsletter with over 500, 000 subscriptions and a sold out tour. Perhaps it is no wonder that Clinton felt his own message was being drowned out. Such a blend of entertainment and news turned out to be highly potent and *The Rush Limbaugh Show* was the beginning of a surge in "infotainment" and conservative media.

Rush Limbaugh's public image is unmatched in American society today. He is feared by the members of his own party, who rarely dare to speak against him. His opposition never seems to get the best of him, and after 24 years his influence is still felt as strongly as ever. When student activist Sandra Fluke was attacked by Limbaugh on his show during the spring of 2012,

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<sup>3</sup> Jeff Land, "Sitting in Limbaugh: Bombast in Broadcasting," in *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, ed. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 242.

<sup>4</sup> Zev Chafets, *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One* (New York: Sentinel, 2010), 11-31.

President Barack Obama called her to express his support. The president's involvement points to Limbaugh's influence as an opinion leader. This thesis seeks to answer three questions: first, what is Limbaugh's appeal as a public person; second, what are Limbaugh's methods and tactics and third, what has been Rush Limbaugh's impact on the national political and cultural scene during his 24 years as a participant in the public discourse. My method will be an analytic approach to Limbaugh from different angles.

## Chapter Outline

Rush Limbaugh's style was deemed "unique" when he first started getting national attention. Limbaugh willingly admits that his showmanship is inspired by Chicago-based disc jockey Larry Lujack, but has never (as far as my research goes) confessed to being enthusiastic about other right-wing populist politicians. By his critics, he is sometimes compared to Father Coughlin who with his warm "honey-like" sounding voice spread anti-Semitism over the airwaves in the 1930s. While Limbaugh has never shown any anti-Semitic tendencies, there are some similarities between the two as Father Coughlin displayed some political power during his height.<sup>5</sup> I have rather chosen to look at two intertwined populist phenomena that occurred when Limbaugh was an adolescent and a young adult. In chapter two, in order to explain some of the aspects behind Limbaugh's popularity, I take a closer look at the appeal of populist politicians George Wallace and President Richard Nixon's Vice President, Spiro Agnew. Limbaugh's core constituency is white working- and middle-class men, which is the same demographic group that supported Wallace and Agnew. As relatively little has been written about Limbaugh, it is useful to further

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<sup>5</sup> In 1935 Father Coughlin urged his listeners to block a plan to create a World Court, a proposal which President Franklin D. Roosevelt supported. Coughlin's appeal produced more than 1 million telegrams. Congress was stunned by Coughlin's power, and the World Court proposal was defeated. See "Father Coughlin: Fomenting Anti-Semitism via the Radio" in *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History*, Rodger Streitmatter, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012), 114.

research the factors which caused the rise of right-wing populist politicians like George Wallace and Spiro Agnew.

Family background and upbringing influence a person's personality and help shape the way he or she views the world. In chapter three I discuss in which way Limbaugh's childhood may have contributed to who he is today. According to himself, Limbaugh dreamed of becoming a disc jockey from an early age. He spent many years developing his radio persona, and I look at some of his influences in that regard. Some of the scandals Limbaugh has been involved in over the years have been of a private character, and I argue that the way he has emerged from these, has reinforced his relationship with his followers.

Chapter four is about *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, how Limbaugh sounds, and how he works. Limbaugh's "raw" rhetoric affected his listeners when he first appeared, because he did not sound like anything else at the time. Further, I look at Limbaugh's preparations before each show, and whether his critics are justified when accusing him of propaganda. Finally, I study his listeners.

Chapter five is about Limbaugh's political activism. I explore Limbaugh's impact on the political scene and, moreover, I research Limbaugh's political influence, and what his role inside the Republican Party consists of. I look at the relationship between President Bill Clinton and Rush Limbaugh, and furthermore how Limbaugh has reacted to the Obama presidency. I describe what is referred to as "the Rush effect," as well as one of Limbaugh's main methods – "turning the tables." Finally, I discuss the many accusations of Limbaugh being a racist as well as a misogynist.



## Review of Literature

Two biographies have been written about Limbaugh during his time in the limelight: *The Rush*

*Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God* by Paul D. Colford and Zev Chafets' *Rush*

*Limbaugh: An Army of One*. *The Rush Limbaugh Story* was published in 1993 when Limbaugh was at the height of his popularity. Colford, who was a freelance journalist for *New York Times* and *Newsday* at the time of writing, later published *Howard Stern: King of All Media*, a biography of radio personality Howard Stern. His interest in radio is reflected in his Limbaugh biography, and it is a book about the radio industry as much as it is about Limbaugh.

Otherwise *The Rush Limbaugh Story* at best can be described as being in part an unauthorized biography. While Limbaugh did not participate directly, Colford was given permission to conduct several long interviews with Limbaugh's mother and brother, in addition to a number of people connected to Limbaugh in different ways. The reason, according to the author, Limbaugh did not cooperate fully is because at the time he planned to write his own autobiography at a later date.<sup>6</sup> Colford notes that there is no evidence that Limbaugh at any point tried to stop the book. *The Rush Limbaugh Story* gives a thorough insight into Limbaugh's upbringing as well as his way to the top. The book offers a great deal of information, but is flawed by its admiring tone. Some of the interview subjects are slightly critical to Limbaugh's methods, but Colford seeks to give a description of Limbaugh's life, rather than to problematize any aspects of his life and career.

The second biography on Limbaugh, by Zev Chafets, was published in 2009 after Limbaugh once again reached a career height. Chafets, like Colford, is a freelance journalist and has contributed regularly to the *New York Daily News* and *New York Times Magazine*. *Rush*

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<sup>6</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, xii.

*Limbaugh: An Army of One* is an extension of a several page long portrait Chafets wrote for the *New York Times Magazine* in 2008. Chafets is the author of ten other books of fiction, media criticism and social and political commentary.

Like *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, *An Army of One* is not an authorized biography, but rather a portrait. The book's research includes full access to Limbaugh's life over a long period of time. Chafets visited and interviewed Limbaugh's brother in Cape Girardeau, Limbaugh's home town in Missouri, and was invited to stay with him in Florida. *An Army of One* gives a detailed account of Limbaugh's life and career. He quotes interviews with Limbaugh's staff and friends, including Karl Rove, Roger Ailes, and Ann Coulter. Although Chafets has also interviewed "enemies" of Limbaugh, such as Democratic politician Al Sharpton, Chafets rarely problematizes controversies concerning Limbaugh's style – and when he does, Limbaugh comes out in a positive light.

Part of the problem perhaps lies in that these books are written to sell and not necessarily to break any new ground. Chafets notes that it was difficult to find a publisher for his project without writing a book with the words "idiot" or "liar" in the title.<sup>7</sup> *An Army of One* was at last published on Sentinel, a publisher in the Penguin Group – and was a national bestseller.<sup>8</sup>

The polemic right-wing populism Limbaugh practices was first articulated by George Wallace in the 1960s and 1970s, and was later developed and "perfected" by members of the Republican Party. In *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994*, historian Dan T. Carter traces a line from Wallace to the

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<sup>7</sup> This refers to comedian and politician Al Franken's book, *Rush Limbaugh is a Big Fat Idiot and Other Observations*, which was published in 1996.

<sup>8</sup> Sentinel was established in 2003, and is a self-declared, conservative "right of center" publishing house. <http://us.penguin.com/static/pages/publishers/adult/sentinel.html>

Republican landslide congressional election in 1994. According to Carter, Republicans have refused to acknowledge Wallace as an influence, much less a model. But the essential differences between Wallace's coarse public rhetoric and the arguments of postmodern conservatives<sup>9</sup> have been more a matter of style than of substance. While Carter never mentions Limbaugh by name, Limbaugh is often credited with being an important influence on the election result that resulted in the Republican takeover of the Congress in 1994.<sup>10</sup>

*From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich* was published in 1996 as an addition to Carter's previous and extensive work on George Wallace, *The Politics of Rage: The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*, from 1995. *The Politics of Rage* is perhaps the best description to date of George Wallace the politician, as well as of the human being behind the public image. Carter, a historian with the American South as his main scholarly field, argues that Wallace, who ran unsuccessfully for president four times, is the most influential loser in American twentieth century politics. Carter thoroughly describes Wallace's childhood and life as a young adult, and argues how Wallace's experiences influenced and shaped Wallace as a politician. His life-experiences as child and adolescent gave him an instinct for the dissatisfaction which often characterizes right-wing politics aimed towards the working-class. Carter argues in both books how Wallace's masculine "Southern bad boy persona" was the main factor in his appeal to white working-class males. Similar traits can be found in Limbaugh, and may help to explain some of the bases of Limbaugh's long-lasting appeal.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The term "postmodern conservatives" is taken from Kevin Mattson's essay "The Rise of Postmodern Conservatism," in *American Thought and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* ed. Martin Halliwell and Catherine Morley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), 81-96.

<sup>10</sup> Dan T. Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

<sup>11</sup> Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, The Origins of the New Conservatism and the Transformation of American Politics*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000).

In *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, Carter continues the argumentation from *The Politics of Rage*, but stretches the timeline into the 1990s. According to Carter, Wallace's emergence on the national scene in 1963 was an important cause as to why, in a gradual confluence, racial and economic conservatism reshaped America politics in the 1970s. Carter surveys how prominent conservative politicians have used race as a factor to appeal to the white working-class voters. Carter explains how the personalities of politicians such as Wallace, Nixon, and Reagan were a significant component in their political views. Carter's work on Wallace, and his political influence, is useful in order to understand Limbaugh's appeal among white working-class voters. Carter has used an impressive amount of sources and gives a detailed account of George Wallace and the origins of the Conservative Counterrevolution, as well as the workings behind post-modern conservatism.

In 1994, media scholar John Fiske published a work entitled *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* in which Limbaugh features prominently. Fiske focuses on three important events which occurred in the beginning of the 1990s: the Murphy Brown/Dan Quayle "single mother" debate, the Anita Hill hearings, and the Rodney King trial and the riot in its aftermath. Fiske argues that media and politics are becoming more and more intertwined and that popular culture has become a part of the political discourse. On Limbaugh, Fiske emphasizes that Limbaugh's coarseness seemed "real" to his audience contrary to other more script based performers. Like Carter, Fiske argues the importance of race as a political factor in order to understand Limbaugh's appeal as a political activist. Fiske concentrates almost exclusively on *Rush Limbaugh: The Television Show* rather than his radio program.<sup>12</sup> Fiske places Limbaugh in a series of events that shaped the 1990s. *Media Matters* contains a number of unedited transcripts

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<sup>12</sup> *Rush Limbaugh: The Television Show* ran from 1992 to 1996.

from Limbaugh's television show which Fiske draws from in his argumentation. When conducting a study of Rush Limbaugh in 2012, it is useful to see how he was viewed by contemporary media scholars at the height of his career.<sup>13</sup>

Another interesting study of Rush Limbaugh appears in cultural historian and professor of Journalism Rodger Streitmatter's book, *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Shaped American History*, which was first published in 1997. In a chapter titled "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," Streitmatter argues how Limbaugh has influenced both American news media and politics. According to Streitmatter, Limbaugh was a leading force in the 1994 Republican landslide in the United States Congress election. He continues to argue that Limbaugh was a significant factor in the increasing trend of "infotainment." Streitmatter gives a good account on how Limbaugh was described by the contemporary media after gaining success. The essay reviews Limbaugh as both a media personality in addition to political activist. In the third edition of the book, *Mightier than the Sword*'s timeline spans from news media's part in the American Revolution to the election of President Barack Obama in 2008, thus placing Limbaugh in a larger historical picture. Streitmatter focuses on the "how" rather than the "why." He describes in what way Limbaugh became America's leading radio talk show host, but is not concerned with the deeper meanings behind Limbaugh's popularity.<sup>14</sup>

In *Hot Air: All Talk, All the Time*, the media critic for the *Washington Post*<sup>15</sup> Howard Kurtz problematizes the talk show explosion in America in the 1990s. As an experienced media

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<sup>13</sup> John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).

<sup>14</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution" in *Mightier than the Sword: How the News Media Have Shaped American History* 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2012).

<sup>15</sup> Kurtz joined the *Washington Post* in 1981, but left in 2010 to work for the online publication *The Daily Beast*.

writer Kurtz has a lot of knowledge on the subject. *Hot Air* discusses every major talk show at the time, and identifies problems related to this media trend such as “conflict of interest,” “sensationalism,” and “lack of preparation.” In the chapter “The Rush Hour,” Kurtz gives an assessment of Rush Limbaugh. *Hot Air* was first published in 1996, a couple of years after Limbaugh’s definitive career height. Kurtz offers new and different angles in order to understand the “Limbaugh-phenomenon.” He does not focus on the format of “talk radio,” but rather on Limbaugh’s standing in the media in general, and on how Limbaugh is viewed as a political actor. Kurtz concentrates on Limbaugh’s failings, both personal and career wise. “The Rush Hour” is written from a journalist’s point of view which differs from that of a scholar in that it is more sensation seeking.<sup>16</sup>

Perhaps the best work on Limbaugh to date, in my opinion, is found in a collection of essays titled *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*, edited by Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage. In an essay called “Sitting in Limbaugh: Bombast in Broadcasting,” media scholar Jeff Land presents a good understanding of Rush Limbaugh. Land ties Limbaugh to George Wallace and Ronald Reagan, and points to how Limbaugh echoes the two politicians in his rhetorical style. Land focuses on the medium of “talk radio” and on how Limbaugh relates to his followers, as well as on how Limbaugh’s fans relate to the conservatism he professes. Land places importance on the populist part of Limbaugh’s appeal. In addition, he includes a section in which he analyzes Limbaugh’s attacks on feminism. At one point he compares Limbaugh’s style to the one of a preacher, in the manner in which Limbaugh claims to be the bearer of truth.<sup>17</sup> What makes Land’s work stand out is in the number of approaches by which he studies Limbaugh; he does not focus his effort on Limbaugh’s radio show, but takes into account his radio show,

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<sup>16</sup> Howard Kurtz, “The Rush Hour,” in *Hot Air: All Talk All the Time* (New York: Basic Books, 1997).

<sup>17</sup> Land, “Sitting in Limbaugh: Bombast in Broadcasting,” 235.

Limbaugh's television program, his two books, and the *Limbaugh Newsletter*. As a scholarly study of Limbaugh, Land's contribution is very good.

So far I have reviewed the works of political historians, cultural historians, and media scholars. Since Limbaugh is a political activist with considerable influence, political scientists have also conducted studies on him. In 2002, David C. Barker published an academic study called *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior*. Barker argues how exposure to Limbaugh, and other conservative talk radio programs, has an effect on voters. Barker asks whether talk radio enhance the understanding of public issues, or serve as a breeding ground for misunderstanding. He concludes with the latter. He bases his arguments on charts and statistics which are incomprehensible to a reader outside his field. Barker refers to his method as a "Value Heresthetic Model of Political Persuasion."<sup>18</sup> *Rushed to Judgment* is weakened by Barker's overly negative and sarcastic attitude towards Limbaugh and his listeners.

The latest extensive scholarly work on Rush Limbaugh is *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* which was published in 2008, by political communication scholars Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella. Jamieson and Cappella give a thorough analysis of the rhetorical methods used by Limbaugh, and three other actors in the conservative media: the editorial page in *Wall Street Journal* and two programs on *Fox News Network*. The authors argue that these three actors (in addition to others) provide a media "echo chamber" consisting of conservative politics. Jamieson and Cappella's arguments are founded on a large amount of research and they give good examples of how twenty-first century conservative media work together in order to influence the political discourse. *Echo Chamber*

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<sup>18</sup> David C. Barker. *Rushed to Judgment: Talk Radio, Persuasion, and American Political Behavior* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 30.

does not address whether there is also a liberal “echo chamber” in contemporary media.

Jamieson and Cappella relate to Limbaugh solely as a political activist and do not consider him to be also an entertainer. The work is significant in order to understand American conservative media, but fails to give a complete picture of Rush Limbaugh.<sup>19</sup>

While several journalists have made an effort to describe Rush Limbaugh’s influence and appeal, not many scholars have done so. The best works in order to understand Limbaugh are (naturally) produced by media scholars. Both Rodger Streitmatter and Jeff Land give good accounts of Rush Limbaugh. However, both studies, like Kurtz’s *Hot Air*, were published in the second half of the 1990s and not much has been produced on Limbaugh by media scholars since. I have yet to find historians interested in Limbaugh as a research subject.<sup>20</sup> Limbaugh is completely overlooked by political historian Dan T. Carter in his effort to explain the reasons behind the Republican landslide in the congressional election of 1994. Political scientists place importance in Limbaugh, and credit him with having influence, but overlook that part of his working method that is due to him as being an entertainer. Thereby a significant portion is not included in the study, and half of the picture is missing. Perhaps in order to produce a complete study on Limbaugh one has to draw sources from all three academic disciplines cited above: history, media studies, and political science – which is the aim of my thesis.

## Primary Sources

Rush Limbaugh is the author of two books which both were issued in the first half of the 1990s, at the height of Limbaugh’s career. *The Way Things Ought to Be* was published in 1992 and was written with the assistance of *Wall Street Journal* editorial writer John Fund. The sequel *See, I*

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<sup>19</sup> Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008).

<sup>20</sup> Rodger Streitmatter is sometimes referred to as a cultural historian but officially holds the title of Professor of Journalism.



*Told You So* was issued in 1993 and written with the help of Joseph Farah, a journalist and the author behind several conservative themed books. Limbaugh is named as the only writer of the books and the information on Fund and Farah appear in the acknowledgements. Throughout this thesis I will refer to the paperback edition of *See, I Told You So*, which was published in 1994 and contains a new afterword by Limbaugh.

*The Way Things Ought to Be* is, in Limbaugh's own words, "a bit about myself and my radio show and where I stand on the important political and social issues affecting our society today."<sup>21</sup> Its preface is an advisory for the reader which states that: "By the time you have wisely purchased this tome most critics will undoubtedly have savaged it. In many cases, their reviews will have been written before this book was published. How do I know this? Because I do."<sup>22</sup> The idea of the harassed conservative is an important part of Limbaugh's "act" and appeal. The tone in the above quoted statement points to that in the remainder of the book. The hardcover copy is 304 pages long with a slightly larger font than what is standard. Most of the twenty-seven chapters have sub headlines, and some of the chapters, not all, have specific introductions and conclusions.

The two first chapters describe Limbaugh's background and road to success. The third chapter is called "My Success Is Not Determined by Who Wins Elections" in which he maintains that he is an entertainer first and politician second. The show always comes first, according to Limbaugh. Yet he confesses that much of the success of the show is primarily because of his political views. "My theory," says Limbaugh, "is that by interweaving a conservative message with an entertaining, innovative radio program, I can make a greater impact on people and

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<sup>21</sup> Rush H. Limbaugh, III, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1992), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, ix.

demonstrate by example a human side to conservatism.”<sup>23</sup> This is an open admission of his intent behind the show, but also points to the complexity surrounding political entertainment that has a clear objective.

Limbaugh is intentionally ambiguous. His self-proclaimed philosophy is “People: Think for Yourself or Demonstrating Absurdity by being Absurd,”<sup>24</sup> which is also the title of the fourth chapter in *The Way Things Ought to Be*. This philosophy, which he used as a defense most recently in the Sandra Fluke-affair, exempts Limbaugh from much responsibility. Limbaugh has been developing this method from his early days as a disc jockey, and repeatedly refers to this as his main viewpoint on his show.

The remaining twenty-three chapters are about current political causes and affairs. What follows is a small selection: “Abortion: Our Next Civil War” (Ch. 6), “The Saga of Anita Hill” (Ch. 11), “Feminism and the Culture War” (Ch. 17), and “The Rodney King Affair” (Ch. 19).

Limbaugh is very personal when explaining his political views and often illustrates his arguments with an anecdote from his own life. In “Feminism and the Culture War” he tells the reader about his personal experiences with feminism: “Soon I was encountering feminism when I would go on dates. You may laugh, but this mess got so bad that it became sexist to complement a woman on her appearance. ‘What about my brain, you pig?’ sneered one woman when I greeted her at the beginning of an evening. I’m serious. To this day I am a little queasy about complimenting a woman on her appearance because to do so meant you were probably a lecher, interested in only cheap sex, and that was wrong. I could afford more.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 190.

*See, I Told You So* was originally published in 1993, and republished in a pocketbook edition in 1994. The softback issue is 410 pages and contains, like its predecessor, twenty-seven chapters. While the style is unmistakable Limbaugh, *See I Told You So* is far more political than *The Way Things Ought to Be*. The “skits” and parodies from the first book are replaced by tables with the tax rates from 1980 to 1992. Limbaugh stays true to his recipe but seems more serious. There are chapters with titles like “Conservatism and Race” (Ch. 19) or “The Case for Less Government” (Ch. 21). He continues to speak directly to his readers and address them as “my friends.” In the last chapter Limbaugh urges Republicans all over the country to take action: “We need to publicize the message that federal intervention has contributed to the deterioration of our schools. [...] We must become a people who believe in something. [...] We must focus on local and state government. Some of us have forgotten that our movement is not dependent on the presidency alone.”<sup>26</sup>

Although, the first book is more humorous than the second, both volumes come across as honest. There is no doubt that they represent Limbaugh’s political views and rhetorical style. He has never recounted anything from either one. They serve as a compilation of his radio program, and he often refers to his two books on the show. In terms of primary sources they are a valuable tool in the study of Rush Limbaugh – he has not changed his style in the twenty-four years he has been a nationally syndicated radio host, nor has he changed his political opinions.

Limbaugh posts large parts of his daily show in the form of seemingly unedited transcripts on the show’s website [www.rushlimbaugh.com](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com). These records date back to 2004 and the website also offers Internet links to the news sources of the issues which are being discussed by Limbaugh.

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<sup>26</sup> Rush H. Limbaugh, III, *See, I Told You So*, (New York: Pocket Star Books, 1994), 390-392.

## Other Sources

As for transcripts, I have also used some of the examples found in John Fiske's *Media Matters*.

Whereas these are mainly from Limbaugh's television show, they give an unedited perception of Limbaugh's rhetoric and style. In addition, I have used newspaper and magazine articles, notably gathered from the *New York Times*' and *Time*'s extensive archives, as well as some "eye witness" depictions by Hunter S. Thompson and Theodore H. White, and a collection of Spiro Agnew's speeches, published by himself in 1970.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2006); Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President 1968* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969); Spiro T. Agnew, *Frankly Speaking: A Collection of Extraordinary Speeches* (Washington D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1970).

## Chapter Two: “Telling It like It Is” – The Rise of Southern Populism in American Politics

The contours of Limbaugh’s right-wing populism were first articulated in the national presidential campaigns of George Wallace in 1968 and 1972. But it was not just Wallace’s political views that attracted his followers: it was also his demeanor as a rebellious “Southern bad boy” who spoke up against the establishment. With his “snarling sarcastic attacks” Wallace voiced the frustration felt by a large number of white blue-collar men during a time that saw many changes. Wallace used humor in his speeches to get his point across, as did Nixon’s Vice President Spiro Agnew. Agnew, who was governor of Maryland from 1967 to 1969, was chosen by Nixon as a surrogate to Wallace. Agnew’s time on the national political scene would prove short, but during his years in office his public image shared similarities with that of Rush Limbaugh. In this chapter I explore which factors led to the rise of these two populist politicians. My theory is that the rhetoric styles and the public images of George Wallace and Spiro Agnew laid the groundwork for a media personality like Rush Limbaugh.

### An Altered Political Landscape

In retrospect it is clear that the 1964 presidential election was the beginning of the end of the liberal consensus in American politics, and the start of the rise of modern conservatism. The Democratic Party’s pledge to civil rights in the 1960s, and Republican presidential nominee Barry Goldwater’s opposition to the 1964 Civil Rights Act, set in motion a larger political process. After the 1964 election, the core meaning of both liberalism and conservatism was altered, and the public perception of the Democratic and the Republican Party was changed. The Democratic Party’s association with the civil rights movement created a backlash among some of the party’s traditional electorate, notably the white lower middle- and working-class and the Republican Party soon took advantage of this backlash. The connection between the presidential

wing of the Democratic Party and the groups which were now perceived as protected became a gold mine for the Republican Party. The G.O.P. developed a new strategy designed to exploit the unpopularity of the Democratic Party's elites.<sup>28</sup>

Central to this development was the presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, and Richard Nixon in the 1960s and 1970s. The rhetoric themes and tactics from these campaigns have influenced and shaped the GOP up until today. The altered political landscape, which initially stemmed from the massive resistance to court-ordered desegregation in the South, evolved into a Republican right-wing populism that was created to attract white working and lower-middle-class voters who felt overlooked by the liberal Democratic establishment.<sup>29</sup>

In *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics*, Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall argue that George Wallace provided a sense of moral legitimacy to the members of the white population who felt that they were threatened by the civil rights revolution. Rather than focusing on the African-Americans, whose claim to equality was indisputable, Wallace emphasized and expressed the anger of the white working-class onto the liberal establishment, including judges, lawyers, senators, newspaper editors, and high standing members of the church, who supported desegregation. Wallace, who was a Southern Democrat, functioned as a pioneer for the Republican Party in spreading hate-fueled right-wing populism.<sup>30</sup>

Ultimately it was Ronald Reagan, through his long quest for the presidency that merged, updated, and refined the right-wing populist race-coded strategies of Wallace and Nixon. The 1980s were not characterized by Republican political innovation but instead the drive to

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<sup>28</sup> Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1992), 8, 9.

<sup>29</sup> Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 8, 9.

<sup>30</sup> Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 10.

strengthen and adjust the messages established during the two previous decades. In addition the Republican Party concentrated their effort in developing powerful new tools of political technology. Among these were computerized direct mail, tracking polls, focus groups, marketing techniques, and the manipulation of voter lists.<sup>31</sup> For the last two decades much of this effort has been concentrated around the broadcasting media. In chapter three and five I will discuss how Rush Limbaugh was quickly embraced by top Republican strategists and used as an instrument to attract voters.

### George Wallace: The Most Important Loser in Twentieth Century American Politics

While Barry Goldwater in hindsight is viewed to have been ahead of his time, he nevertheless lost by considerable margin to Lyndon B. Johnson. Johnson won with 43,126,218 of the votes to 27,174,898 votes for Goldwater.<sup>32</sup> He won the South, but he won the “wrong” states. The loss was of such proportions that the *New York Times* wrote that “Barry Goldwater not only lost the presidential election yesterday but the conservative cause as well. [...] He wrecked his party for a long time to come and is not even likely to control the wreckage.”<sup>33</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, Goldwater had only God to thank that so many Republicans voted for him at all, and that they probably did it out of habit.<sup>34</sup> Nonetheless, Goldwater’s success in the South was historic and revealed a new political landscape. In Alabama and Mississippi he won with respectively 70 and 87 percent of the votes. In addition he won South Carolina (59 percent),

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<sup>31</sup> Edsall and Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 11.

<sup>32</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 2002), 513.

<sup>33</sup> James Reston, *New York Times*, November 5, 1964, quoted in Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 513.

<sup>34</sup> *Washington Post* quoted in Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 513.

Louisiana (57 percent), Georgia (55 percent), and his own home state Arizona with a half percent.<sup>35</sup>

One can point to several reasons to why Goldwater lost by such numbers. He was up against a strong, popular opponent, who was riding on a sympathy wave after President Kennedy's death. Goldwater had reluctantly been drafted into the nomination, and he was a controversial candidate also inside the Republican Party.<sup>36</sup> The infamous Daisy ad, in which it was implied that a victory for Goldwater could mean an atomic war in the near future, was only aired once, but clips from it were televised throughout the autumn of 1964.<sup>37</sup> The media in general supported the civil rights movement and thereby disagreed with Goldwater's opposition against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. In fact, postmodern conservatives' claim that the mainstream media are deliberately working against the Republican Party has its origins from the Goldwater campaign.<sup>38</sup> Conservative opinion leader William F. Buckley's magazine *National Review* was a forerunner in this matter.<sup>39</sup>

One of the main reasons behind Goldwater's dramatic loss was that he failed to connect with his potential constituency. The predicted white backlash among the blue-collar white workers did not materialize in the 1964 election. The many Slavs, Italians, and others that stated that they planned to vote for Goldwater when polled ahead of election day, remained loyal to the Democratic Party in the election itself. "For over a year, backlash had loomed in the public

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<sup>35</sup> Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 514.

<sup>36</sup> Alf Thomas Tønnessen, "Hunting Where the Ducks Are: Barry Goldwater's Contribution to the Republican Takeover of the Solidly Democratic South in the Presidential Election," (Master Thesis, University of Oslo, 2003), 30-31.

<sup>37</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 225.

<sup>38</sup> Mattson "The Rise of Postmodern Conservatism," 91.

<sup>39</sup> According to Mattson, complaints about the media littered the pages of *National Review* in the 1950s, and Goldwater's campaign prompted more. See Mattson "The Rise of Postmodern Conservatism," 91.



image like a pit bull straining at the leash,” writes Rick Perlstein in *Before the Storm*, “But now it was judged as the mouse that roared.”<sup>40</sup>

Goldwater was often met with large and enthusiastic crowds on the campaign trail. Yet, in the face of roaring ovations at rallies of followers, Goldwater appeared impatient and remote, and was unsuccessful in engaging the audience. Journalists noted that his speeches lacked fire and revealed no deep feeling. Confronted with these reports, Goldwater became increasingly defensive. In part, writes Robert A. Goldberg, there was his flat delivery habit: “a career-long wooden style that endeared him to loyalists and resisted coaching.”<sup>41</sup> Secondly, Goldwater came off poorly in comparison to Johnson. Only part of Johnson’s message was delivered in formal speeches. Despite his security sensitive staff, Johnson would step into the crowds as often as possible and use both hands to grab at those reaching onto to him. He would wink and nod at those he could not reach, and really strived to make a personal connection. Johnson’s campaign rallies ended up being “happenings” during the fall of 1964, writes Goldberg.<sup>42</sup>

Whereas Goldwater failed in engaging potential followers, that was not the case with George C. Wallace. Historian Dan T. Carter maintains that George Wallace is the most important loser in twentieth century American politics. The genius of Wallace, argues Carter, lay in his ability to promote traditional conservatism in a language and style to which the working-class could relate. While Goldwater and his generation of right-wing Republicans spoke in the manner of the upper-class, Wallace articulated the significance of religion, of hard work and self-restraint, and the importance of upholding the autonomy of the local community. George Wallace was not the first postwar political figure to appeal for a return to traditional American

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<sup>40</sup> Perlstein, *Before the Storm*, 515.

<sup>41</sup> Robert Alan Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 222, 223.

<sup>42</sup> Goldberg, *Barry Goldwater*, 228.

values, but he more than any other political leader of his generation was the instigator of the new social conservatism. Wallace compounded racial fear, anti-communism, cultural nostalgia, and traditional right-wing economics into a movement that laid the foundation for the conservative counter-revolution that reshaped American politics in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>43</sup>

George Wallace entered the national political scene with his inauguration address as newly elected governor of Alabama in January 1963. The speech was aired on all the three major networks' evening broadcast's and contained the now infamous line: "Segregation now, segregation tomorrow, segregation forever!" Wallace later stated that "segregation" was just a symbolic issue, and that his main political cause was "state rights." The speech was written, however, by Asa Carter, founder and coeditor of the *Southerner*, one of the most racist magazines published in the 1950s, which indicates that the racially prejudiced nature of the speech was on purpose. Wallace's 1963 inaugural speech was his Faustian bargain: it gave him national notoriety, but also forever placed him in the periphery of American politics.<sup>44</sup>

Wallace instinctively understood both media and politics. In June of 1963, he fulfilled his pledge to block the entrance of two black students to the University of Alabama. More than two hundred newspaper reporters gathered on the Tuscaloosa campus for this highly staged event. The image of Wallace sternly raising his one hand and insisting that he would stand firm to "forbid this illegal and unwarranted action by the Central Government"<sup>45</sup> became a part of American collective memory. It was, of course, a staged performance for the benefit of a national television audience. Within two hours the federal government had nationalized the Alabama

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<sup>43</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 12.

<sup>44</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 2.

<sup>45</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 4.

National Guard, Wallace had backed down, the students had been enrolled, and the governor had returned to Montgomery.<sup>46</sup>

Leaders of both parties and the media predicted that “the Stand at the Schoolhouse Door” would be the ruin of Wallace in terms of the national political scene. They were wrong. First, the television coverage gave Wallace stature. By claiming center stage with the representative of the President of the United States, General Attorney Nicholas deBelle Katzenbach, a representative who had to treat him with respect and even deference, Wallace transformed himself into a major player in American politics. Second, by producing a relatively dignified media event, Wallace showed that he understood the old saying that a picture (or in this case film) is worth more than a thousand words. The newspapers might describe the complexities of Wallace’s involvement in racist politics, but what 78 million viewers saw on the three major networks’ evening news programs were four to six minutes long clips. George Wallace appeared indignant, but composed, and, more importantly, nothing like the raving demagogue most Americans expected to see. Wallace understood how the TV medium requires, in the sense of Marshall McLuhan, a “cool,” understated, and self-controlled performance in order to get the message across. Any presentation that was exaggerated, caustic, and “hot,” was likely to turn off the audience.<sup>47</sup> In the week following the event, more than 100,000 congratulatory telegrams were sent to the office of the Alabama governor. Over half came from outside the South, and 95 percent supported George Wallace.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 4, 5.

<sup>47</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 345.

<sup>48</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 6.

Wallace was in many ways his own secret weapon, writes Dan T. Carter. He was blessed with an excellent memory for names and faces. Wallace could walk into a crowded room and identify every individual, some of whom he had only met briefly ten or eight years earlier. He grew up in a once prosperous family in a small town called Clio in south Alabama. His grandfather had been wealthy, but by the time Wallace was born, his father's alcoholism had caused the family to slide into poverty. His mother kept the family together but was cold and distant. To compensate for the lack of parental affection, Wallace learned early to ingratiate himself with everyone he met.<sup>49</sup>

He was popular and at the top of his class at the University of Alabama, where he studied law, but at the same time always aware of his "country" background and his lack of "polish" and sophistication. He was not granted admission into the "right" circles, where the sons of Alabama planters and businessmen formed relationships that would shape the rest of their lives. Privately he resented what he saw as condescension and patronization from the upper-class of Montgomery and Birmingham. In the army he was well liked and had many friends, but the teasing by the northern soldiers about his accent and provincialism often annoyed him and contributed to how he looked at the world. His childhood and his experiences in college, law school, and the army forged an identity which was driven by two powerful forces: resentment and a constant search for affection and respect.<sup>50</sup>

Wallace's sensitivity to being "looked down on" and his identity as a harassed white southerner strengthened his appeal to white ethnic minorities and working-class Americans. Many of his followers felt alienated. Like the Populists of the late nineteenth century, Wallace's

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<sup>49</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 11.

<sup>50</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 12.

supporters, both North and South, felt psychologically and culturally isolated from the dominant trends of American life in the 1960s. But in contrast to the Populists neither Wallace nor his followers had any deep interest in the workings of the American economic system. Wallace's followers were, like the Populists before them, embittered over the way in which the elites mocked their lack of sophistication. No Wallace speech was complete without the defensive claim that he and his supporters were "just as cultured and refined" as those "New York reporters."<sup>51</sup> His appeal amongst the white voters in the urban areas in the Northeast and the Midwest initially surprised political observers, but in retrospect it is not hard to see why he drew support from these groups. Many of these voters saw Wallace as a kindred spirit: a man despised and dismissed by the liberal elites.<sup>52</sup>

The complexity of Alabama politics both strengthened and limited Wallace's national appeal. He began his career as a protégé of one of the most liberal southern politicians in modern history, James Folsom. As a delegate to the 1948 National Democratic Convention, Wallace stayed with the party loyalists and refused to join the racist Dixiecrat walkout for Strom Thurmond. In the state legislature he consistently introduced legislation to aid disadvantaged Alabamians. Alabama, notes Carter, though severely racist, was not Mississippi. By southern standards, Alabama had a substantial organized labor movement and a strong tradition of working-class political activism. Wallace's past support for New Deal liberalism gave him an ear for the complex populist conservatism that characterized blue-collar workers and disillusioned Democrats all over America.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 12.

<sup>52</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 12,13.

<sup>53</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 13.

Political historian Theodore H. White had problems hiding his contempt for Wallace in *The Making of the President 1968*. He describes Wallace as “a little chipmunk-faced man” with “over-cropping black eyebrows” who was “overtowered by Deputy Attorney General Nicholas deBelle Katzenbach”<sup>54</sup> during the previously mentioned “Stand in the Schoolhouse Door.” White acknowledges that Wallace was a good student but continues that “the University of Alabama, through which Wallace worked his way, left no apparent sheen of culture, learning or history on the Wallace personality.”<sup>55</sup>

White seems almost desperate to give a negative impression of Wallace. When joining Wallace in September during the 1968 presidential campaign White complains that no liquor was permitted aboard Wallace’s plane and that smoking was frowned upon. He makes a point that Wallace seems nervous to fly, even though he was in the Air Force during the Second World War, and describes him as such: “A big gold ring glistened on his finger, and in repose his somber face glowered. Occasionally he would run a comb through his sleek glossy hair, halfway between chestnut and jet black; and his close-set eyes were shrunken into deep, dark hollows under the great eyebrows. He was a very little man, almost a frail man, above all a nervous man, his hands twitching when he spoke, shifting from pocket to pocket when he rose.”<sup>56</sup> White, a former pupil at Boston Latin School and a Harvard University alumnus, gave perhaps an insight into how members of the northeastern elites viewed Wallace.

In spite of White’s thinly veiled disgust for Wallace, he readily admitted that Wallace should not be underestimated. The Wallace campaign was open and smart, wrote White. He also praised Wallace for his deeds as governor: “Heavy appropriations for more schools (fourteen

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<sup>54</sup> White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 343.

<sup>55</sup> White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 344.

<sup>56</sup> White, *The Making of the President 1968*, 348.

new junior colleges authorized), more hospitals, mental institutions, nursing homes and clinics, free textbooks, increased social-security benefits for state employees, the largest road-building program in Alabama,”<sup>57</sup> were among Wallace’s achievements according to White. But, these deeds were overshadowed by the fact that Wallace was racist. However, Wallace does not hate black people, he simply believes in apartheid. Moreover, says White, “If George Wallace hates anything, it is not Negroes – it is the Federal government of the United States and it’s ‘pointy-head’ advisers, the ‘the intellectual morons,’ ‘the guideline writers’ of Washington who try to upset the unnatural relation of races and force Negroes and whites to live together in unnatural mixing.”<sup>58</sup>

White makes no effort to conceal that he has anything but contempt for Wallace and his followers. Wallace talked his way through the country during the 1968 presidential campaign in which he identified himself as “the friend of the workingman.” Wallace’s message was that the government had sold the white working-class out. The working-class, according to White, listened to Wallace because “no one else seemed to speak their language.”<sup>59</sup> He said “decent people [were] ashamed to stand with George Wallace; it degraded their sense of themselves as Americans because it gave them no other cause but hate.”<sup>60</sup> With this statement it would seem that White did not regard a large portion of the white working-class as “decent people.”

Dan T. Carter notes how Wallace willingly exploited the racial fears that were looming among white Americans, but that nothing suggests even a hint of anti-Semitism. Some of Wallace’s best friends were Jewish business and community leaders. Wallace also knew that

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<sup>57</sup> White, *The Making of the President* 1968, 344; These programs helped both the white and black population of Alabama. See “The Wallace Paradox,” *New York Times*, September 15, 1998, accessed July 5, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1998/09/15/opinion/the-wallace-paradox.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

<sup>58</sup> White, *The Making of the President* 1968, 345.

<sup>59</sup> White, *The Making of the President* 1968, 350.

<sup>60</sup> White, *The Making of the President* 1968, 350.

anti-Semitic statements would devastate his campaign. He never treated ethnic Americans of eastern and southern European ancestry with disrespect; rather he viewed them as potential allies who shared his fear of blacks, as well as his cultural conservatism. Hostility towards American Jews remained a persistent undercurrent in far-right politics, but only the most fanatical openly promoted a systematic racist ideology. Still, just as he had enlisted key Ku Klux Klan leaders in his 1962 gubernatorial campaign, he collaborated with the far right during his 1968 campaign. According to Carter, Wallace gambled that most of his supporters feared right-wing fanatics less than they did Communists or Black Power advocates – and by all accounts he was right. He once told a reporter “[right-wing] kooks got a right to vote too.”<sup>61</sup>

Among his contemporaries, perhaps “rock and roll” journalist Hunter S. Thompson understood Wallace’s appeal and magnetism better. In his book about the 1972 presidential election, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail ’72*, Thomson visits a Wallace rally at a venue called Serb Hall in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Thompson notes that while he is routinely ignored by the media, Wallace’s rallies “night after night, packed halls in every corner of the state,” and that “every one of these rallies attracted more people than the halls could hold.”<sup>62</sup> The rally in Serb Hall was scheduled for 5:00pm because Wallace was speaking at a much bigger hall at 7:30pm. Thompson arrived a half hour before 5:00pm and nearly a thousand locals had already squeezed into a room that could comfortably seat less than half that number. Several hundred more milled outside. “It was the first time I’d seen Wallace in person,” writes Thompson. “There were no seats in the hall; everybody was standing. The air was electric even before he started talking, and by the time he was five or six minutes into his spiel I had a sense that the bastard had somehow levitated himself and was hovering over us. It reminded me of a

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<sup>61</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 297, 298.

<sup>62</sup> Thompson, *On the Campaign Trail ’72*, 137-139.



Janis Joplin concert. Anybody who doubts the Wallace appeal should go out and catch his act sometime. He jerked this crowd in Serb Hall around like he had them all on wires. They were laughing, shouting, whacking each other on the back...it was a flat-out fire & brimstone *performance*.”<sup>63</sup>

To his followers Wallace was a rock star. They reveled in his performance, and never got tired of hearing the same lines again and again. Wallace’s appeal, according to Dan T. Carter “seemed to lurch uncertainly between eroticism and violence, closer to that of the ‘outlaw’ country-music singer Waylon Jennings than to the suave John Kennedy whom the Alabama governor envied for his effortless grace.”<sup>64</sup> Wallace was one of the last grand masters of the kind of “foot-stomping” public speaking that characterized American politics in the era before television. Thousands of speeches in Kiwanis Clubs and country fairs had given him an infallible sense of what would “play.” He explored his audience’s fears and passions and articulated their emotions in a language and style they understood. The issues might shift from state to state and region to region, but whether Wallace was talking about busing, taxes, or prayer in the schools, he would always celebrate, like the Populists before him, the “producers” of American society: the “beauticians, the truck drivers, the office workers, the policemen, and the small businessmen,”<sup>65</sup> who had originally been the heart of the Democratic Party. Wallace skillfully pulled the elements of xenophobia, racism, and a “plain folk” cultural outlook from American political history. His genius was to voice his listeners’ sense of betrayal and victimhood and to refocus their anger.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Thompson, *On The Campaign Trail '72*, 137-139; Italics appear in the original text.

<sup>64</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 17.

<sup>66</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 17.

In George Wallace, alienated young men found a champion. Journalists at the time were amazed by Wallace's ability to transcend his southern roots by appealing to working-class voters outside the region. What they rarely observed, however, were the particular outlines of that appeal. Wallace, with the image as the confrontational southern bad boy drew his support mostly from young white men between the age of eighteen and thirty-five. As late as three weeks before the election of 1968, he outdrew both Humphrey and Nixon in that segment of the voting population. The bond between Wallace and his audience was similar to the masculine union found in the "locker room." Privately, on the other hand, he feared closeness. He loved talking on the telephone or speaking to a crowd, because there was always a safe distance between him and those who adored him, but he could not tolerate genuine intimacy.<sup>67</sup>

Wallace was the beneficiary of a series of wrenching events during the 1960s. The increasing occurrence of race riots, the anti-war movement which accelerated after 1965, and a sense of a collapse in traditional values, all contributed to his popularity. By the mid-1960s the white backlash was no longer restricted to the South. Even the white northern college students who had traveled to Mississippi and the rest of the Deep South during the Freedom Summer of 1964 appeared to have lost all interest in the civil right struggle.<sup>68</sup> While liberal academics and journalists spoke of the reasons behind the emerging counterculture, Wallace knew that many of which Nixon would later refer to as the Silent Majority, felt betrayed and victimized by the forces of change.<sup>69</sup>

The shifting tide of American Politics came as a surprise to many, especially after Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 landslide election. The nation's attention was focused on the drama

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<sup>67</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 21, 22.

<sup>68</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 306.

<sup>69</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 14.

of the southern civil rights movement, and politicians and journalists paid little notice to the escalating crisis in northern urban ghettos. There were a series of minor black-white clashes in the summer of 1964, but nothing compared to the riot that occurred in mid-August, 1965 in the southeast Los Angeles ghetto of Watts. The riot, instigated by young black men, lasted over several days. By the time thousands of National Guard troops regained control of the city, thirty-four people were dead and nearly a thousand buildings had been damaged or destroyed. Racial tension continued to grow, reaching a climax with the 1967 Newark and Detroit race riots. Towards the end of the summer of 1967 riots in 127 cities led to seventy-seven deaths, more than four thousand arrests, and damages of nearly half a billion dollars.<sup>70</sup>

Martin Luther King argued that the underlying causes of the racial riots of the mid-1960s was poor housing, underemployment, and continued racism in American cities, but Wallace was not willing to listen. Rather he saw opportunity and quickly realized that the civil disturbances of the mid-1960s could be linked to a series of powerful issues (violence, street crime, racial conflicts) that appealed to a constituency outside the South.<sup>71</sup>

A typical Wallace speech would alternate between sarcastic attacks on Washington bureaucrats and gloomy warnings of the breakdown of public order. Wallace would weave the threat of civil disorder, street crime, the growing confidence of minorities, and Communist-inspired pro-Vietcong street demonstrations into angry tapestry. “You people work hard, you save your money, you teach your children to respect the law,” Wallace told his audience of blue-collar workers, and then “[after a violent riot] pseudo-intellectuals’ explain it away by saying the killer didn’t get any watermelon to eat when he was ten years old.”<sup>72</sup> According to White,

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<sup>70</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 301, 302.

<sup>71</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 303.

<sup>72</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 313.

Wallace was saying “what was on their minds, saying it like it is, saying it the way they said it to each other in the bars.”<sup>73</sup>

Wallace support among northern voters was strongest in white neighborhoods which bordered heavily black districts. Between 1965 and 1968 a combination of accelerating price increases and sharp climbs in the payroll and income taxes led to stagnation in real wages for the average worker. Family income rose, but this was primarily because of the increasing movement of women into the workforce. Families were working harder to stay in place. American middle-class and working-class families had reached the peak of the boom years of the postwar era. Ironically, prosperity, not poverty was an important factor in racial polarization. As income for African-Americans rose in the 1940s and 1950s, black families pressed outward from their restricted neighborhoods toward accessible and affordable housing, often in bordering white communities. Samuel Lubell, political observer in the 1960s, wrote that visiting these urban areas was like “inspecting a stretched out war front” where each Wallace precinct was “another outpost marking the borders to which Negro residential movement had pushed.”<sup>74</sup>

It is not easy to predict what would have happened if George Wallace had not been shot on May 15, 1972. In the 1972 Democratic Florida primary Wallace won 42 percent of the votes; no one else came close. In Pennsylvania and Indiana he narrowly lost to Hubert Humphrey who had the support of organized labor and had outspent Wallace eight to one. By mid-May Wallace

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<sup>73</sup> White, *The Making of the President* 1968, 349.

<sup>74</sup> Samuel Lubell, *The Hidden Crisis in American Politics*, (New York: W. W. Norton, Inc., 1970), 105, quoted in Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 348, 349.

had polled a total of 3, 3 million votes to 2, 5 million votes for Humphrey and 2, 1 million for McGovern.<sup>75</sup>

In an article published March 27, 1972 in *Time*, Wallace is described as a demagogue with a simplistic message, but also as a serious threat to the other Democratic primary candidates. *Time*'s "Wallace Watcher" Joseph Kane states that Wallace does not expect to defeat Nixon, but that his wish is to reshape the Democratic Party – to "Send Them a Message" which was the name of his 1972 presidential campaign slogan.<sup>76</sup> The tone however, is different than that of Theodore White. "Wallace looks good," writes *Time*. "His hair is mod-shaggy down to his collar. [...] He is fashionably dressed and sometimes dapper."<sup>77</sup> Two and a half months later Wallace was shot by a psychopathic loner named Arthur Bremer, and his national political career was over. Unlike Medgar Evers, John and Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Wallace survived. His survival prevented him from becoming a martyr for the cause. He would spend his life in excruciating pain, seeking redemption for his previous actions. He ran for governor one last time in Alabama in 1982 and won.<sup>78</sup>

Rush Limbaugh, like George Wallace before him, expresses conservative political doctrines in a style and language that resonates with the lower middle- and working-class voters. By rhetorically attacking the "establishment" Limbaugh has become the working-class' champion - a confrontational "bad boy" who voices the frustration and anger felt in some groups of society. Because large parts of Wallace's speeches had elements of comedy, his followers did

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<sup>75</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 51, 52; In comparison he received 9, 9 million votes in the 1968 presidential election. See Tønnessen, "Hunting Where the Ducks Are," 89.

<sup>76</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 415.

<sup>77</sup> "Politics: A Jarring Message from George," *Time*, March 27, 1972, accessed March 31, 2012.

<http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,910260,00.html>

<sup>78</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*, 52.

not mind hearing him repeat the same content over and over again. By “pushing the envelope” for acceptable language and manner in the public discourse, Wallace contributed to breaking the ground for a media personality like Rush Limbaugh.

### “The Amazing Success Story of ‘Spiro Who?’”

Nixon surprised everyone by selecting the relatively unknown Spiro T. Agnew as his candidate for the vice presidency. Agnew was deemed a light weight by both Nixon’s staff and the press. His lack of knowledge and ignorance on a wide range of subjects proved to be a hard task for those assigned to brief and “shepherd” him through the 1968 campaign.<sup>79</sup> “Spiro who?” asked the pundits who made it clear that they considered Agnew as being unqualified for the national office.<sup>80</sup>

It is widely believed that Richard Nixon chose Spiro Agnew as his running mate so that Agnew could act as a Wallace surrogate. Nixon had begun shaping his political strategy for 1968 soon after Goldwater’s big loss in 1964. In the two years after the 1964 election Nixon traveled 127, 000 miles, visited forty states, and spoke to four hundred groups – nearly half of them in the South.<sup>81</sup> He watched Wallace closely and feared that his involvement in the election would hurt his chances to win. Nixon realized that the trick for candidates who hoped to benefit from the “Wallace factor,” was to exploit the protests Wallace had released, while not being labeled as a racist. Nixon insisted that he chose Agnew because he was a “progressive” border-state

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<sup>79</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 330.

<sup>80</sup> Mark O. Hatfield, with the Senate Historical Office. *Vice Presidents of the United States, 1789-1993* (Washington: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1997), 481-488, accessed March 31, 2012.  
[http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP\\_Spiro\\_Agnew.htm](http://www.senate.gov/artandhistory/history/common/generic/VP_Spiro_Agnew.htm)

<sup>81</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 327.

Republican who took a “forward-looking stance on civil rights, but ... had firmly opposed those who had resorted to violence in promoting their cause.”<sup>82</sup>

By this statement, Nixon was referring to Agnew’s performance as a governor of Maryland during a five-day race riot in Baltimore that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King in April 1968. As the riot cooled down, Agnew had summoned one hundred mainstream black city leaders, including respected community organizers, middle-class preachers, lawyers, businessmen and politicians, to a conference in Annapolis. Instead of inviting them to have a dialogue, Agnew held a speech where he condemned the audience’s failure to distance themselves from the “circuit-riding Hanoi-visiting ...caterwauling, riot-inciting, burn-America-down, type of leader[s]”<sup>83</sup> who he claimed had caused the rioting. Agnew, similar to Wallace, had pointed his finger for emphasis. Three fourths of his audience, many of whom had actively been involved in trying to calm down the rioters, walked out of the meeting. The incident dramatically reversed Agnew’s public image. Afterwards, Baltimore television stations reported a flood of telephone calls supporting the governor.<sup>84</sup>

Spiro Theodore Anagnostopoulos was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1918, to a Greek immigrant. He attended public schools and went to John Hopkins University in 1937 to study chemistry. He decided to transfer the University of Baltimore Law School where he studied law at night while working at a grocery store and an insurance company during the day. He was drafted into the army during World War II, where he won a Bronze Star for his service in France and Germany. He returned to school on the G.I. Bill of Rights and received his law degree in 1947. He practiced law in a Baltimore firm and eventually set up his own law practice in the

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<sup>82</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 331.

<sup>83</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 331.

<sup>84</sup> Carter, *The Politics of Rage*, 331.

Baltimore suburb of Towson. Agnew was teased as a boy because of his Greek background.

After he moved from the city to the suburbs he reinvented his own image. He changed his name from Anagnostopoulos to Agnew, and began calling himself Ted rather than Spiro. He swore that none of his children would have Greek names.<sup>85</sup>

In *Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics & Culture in American Life*, fellow white ethnic<sup>86</sup>

Michael Novak devotes an entire chapter to the vice president titled *Spiro T. Anagnostopoulos: Remembrance of Humiliations Past*.<sup>87</sup> Novak argues throughout the book that the forced assimilation of Americans of eastern and southern European descent into an Anglo-Saxon dominated culture had been unsuccessful. With a reference to the term “melting pot,” Novak claimed that the Americans in question were “unmeltable.” Originally published as *The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics* in 1972, Novak was an influential voice in the movement which called for a new ethnic consciousness in the 1970s – also known as the white ethnic revival. Agnew on the other hand, contrary to Novak’s argument, had “melted” into society quite easily.

Michael Novak, in a mocking manner, comments on Agnew’s remaking his own image, and his journey to the White House.

Anagnostopoulos, by contrast [to Nixon] is ethnic through and through. The son of a restaurateur, he has always been easy-going, shiny-haired, fit. [...] And he (“Ted Agnew”) wide open to the chances and occasions overtaking him, was quick enough to pull out his Arrow knit pullover from his sleek stomach and catch the streaming miracles: improbable election as county executive, improbable chance to become Republican governor, improbable nominee as Nixon’s vice-president, improbable folk-hero to the

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<sup>85</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>86</sup> The term “white ethnic” refer to Americans of southern and eastern European descent. In *Unmeltable Ethnics*, Novak focuses on immigrants, and descendants of immigrants, with Polish, Italian, Greek, and Slavic backgrounds.

<sup>87</sup> Michael Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics: Politics & Culture in American Life*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1996), 137.



nativists: *Spee-ro, he-ro*, household word and hottest populist from Florida to Oklahoma since George Corley Wallace.<sup>88</sup>

Novak's argument is based on the white ethnics' complex position in post-war America. They were white and thus of higher status than minorities with dark skin, but were considered to be of lower status than those of Anglo-Saxon, Germanic, and Nordic heritage. Novak complains that Agnew completely abandoned his Greek heritage, Agnew even converted from Greek Orthodox to Episcopalian, and that he "never did anything for the Greek community in Baltimore except leave it at the earliest opportunity."<sup>89</sup> It appears as though Agnew fell between two chairs. His former community viewed him as a "sell-out," while other Americans still saw him as Greek and of southern European descent.

Nixon expected Agnew to appeal to white southerners and other groups troubled by the civil rights movement and the recent riots. However, attention quickly shifted from this issue during the campaign when Agnew made a number of gaffes, including some ethnic slurs, in addition to accusing Democratic candidate and vice president Hubert Humphrey for being soft on Communism. The public perception of Agnew during the 1968 campaign was that he was too ordinary and unremarkable. He tended to speak in a deadening, monotone voice, and was described as a tall stiff, bullet-headed man - the sort of fastidious dresser who never removed his tie in public. Whether he helped or hurt the Nixon campaign is unclear, but in November the Nixon-Agnew ticket won a narrow victory over Hubert Humphrey.<sup>90</sup>

While Nixon did not wish for his vice president to outshine him, he had pledged to give Agnew a significant policy-making role and, for the first time in vice presidential history, an office in the West Wing of the White House. Nixon encouraged Agnew to use his position as

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<sup>88</sup> Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, 137, 138.

<sup>89</sup> Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, 139.

<sup>90</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

presiding officer of the Senate to get to know the members of Congress in order to serve as their liaison to the White House. Eager to do a good job, Agnew took his new role seriously and enthusiastically charged up Capitol Hill.<sup>91</sup>

Agnew soon learned that there were constraints to his role as presiding officer. One time Agnew had prepared a four minute speech to give in response to a formal welcome from Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, Agnew was informed that he was only given two minutes to reply. Agnew later said that, “it felt like a slap in the face.”<sup>92</sup> Perhaps the biggest humiliation during his first months was when he inadvertently broke precedent by trying to lobby on the Senate floor. During the debate over the ABM (Anti-Ballistic-Missile) Treaty, Agnew approached Idaho Republican Senator Len Jordan and asked how he was going to vote. “You can’t tell me how to vote! You can’t twist my arm!” said the shocked Senator. At the next luncheon of Republican Senators Jordan accused Agnew of breaking the separation of powers and announced the “Jordan Rule,” whereby if the vice president ever again tried to lobby him on anything, he would automatically vote the other way.<sup>93</sup> Jordan’s reaction reflects on Agnew’s standing in Washington.

This and other public mishaps resulted in the White House staff concluding that Agnew was not a “Nixon team player.” The press humorously noted, to White House protests that Agnew was “on a leash.”<sup>94</sup>

The support for Wallace, and Nixon’s victory, suggested that many Americans were growing tired of violent demonstrations in different forms, including the anti-war movement and

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<sup>91</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>92</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>93</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>94</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

the civil rights movement. Nixon had since 1967 spoken of the “quiet Americans,” a “new majority,” “the forgotten majority,” “the backbone of America,” and “the nonshouters, the nondemonstrators” meaning “the real Americans” – middle America – that were not visible on the evening news. This sentiment was, throughout 1969, further developed by Agnew.<sup>95</sup>

In May 1969 Agnew held a speech before the Young President’s Organization in Honolulu titled “Radicalism in Our Midst” which pointed to the anti-intellectual theme that would make Agnew a “house-hold word.” “The American majority may not be book-intellectual but it is practical,” said Agnew.<sup>96</sup> He continued with a charge at the media for not taking responsibility: “All too often the media have been too quick to assume that confrontation is a necessary catharsis to a sick society, to report wanton destruction in terms of noble causes; to publicize the least responsible leadership in any self-proclaimed crusade.”<sup>97</sup>

At this point Agnew was still so low in the White House hierarchy that his task was simply to repeat what the president had said the week before. Agnew’s efforts as a speaker went unnoticed until October 8 and 11, when in Texas and Vermont he delivered two energetic speeches on the nation’s moral crisis. Nixon, though few others, took note and invited Agnew in for a one-on-one meeting. Nixon gave him the assignment of answering North Vietnamese Prime Minister Pham Van Dong’s congratulatory telegram to the peace demonstrators during an address at the Citizens’ Testimonial Dinner in New Orleans. Feeling confident Agnew decided to write his own one-page introduction for the New Orleans speech.<sup>98</sup>

In New Orleans, Agnew continued his anti-intellectual argument.

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<sup>95</sup> Rick Perlstein, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America*, (New York: Scribner, 2008), 435.

<sup>96</sup> Spiro T. Agnew, “Radicalism in Our Midst,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 12.

<sup>97</sup> Agnew, “Radicalism in Our Midst,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 16.

<sup>98</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 430.

Education is being redefined at the demand of the uneducated to suit the ideas of the uneducated. The student now goes to college to proclaim rather than to learn. The lessons of the past are ignored and obliterated in a contemporary antagonism known as the generation gap. A spirit of national masochism prevails, encouraged by an effete corps of impudent snobs who characterize themselves as intellectuals.<sup>99</sup>

The speech was a success. The phrase “an effete corps of impudent snobs” made front pages all over the country.<sup>100</sup> The next night he spoke in Jackson, Mississippi. The speech was called “Racism, the South, and the New Left.” “For too long,” Agnew told the Mississippi Republicans, “the South has been the punching bag for those who characterize themselves as liberal intellectuals. [...] Their course is a course that will ultimately weaken and erode the very fibre [Sic.] of America.”<sup>101</sup>

A new Agnew was born. The next week, at the Republican Dinner in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, Agnew embraced his new role as the “bad cop”:

A little over a week ago, I took a rather unusual step for a Vice President. I said something. Particularly, I said something that was predictably unpopular with the people who would like to run the country without the inconvenience of seeking public office. [...] It appears that by slaughtering a sacred cow I triggered a holy war. I have no regrets I do not intend to repudiate my beliefs, recant my words, or run and hide.<sup>102</sup>

But, notes Rick Perlstein, although the speech invoked laughter, this was not a particularly witty speech. Agnew went on to call the antiwar leaders “political hustlers...who would tell us our values are lies.” They claimed to be leading our youth. But “America cannot afford to write off a whole generation for the decadent thinking of a few” who “prey upon the good intentions of gullible men everywhere,” and “pervert honest concerns into something sick and rancid...” “They are vultures who sit in trees and watch lions battle, knowing that win, lose, or draw, they

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<sup>99</sup> Agnew, “Masochism versus the Facts,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 25.

<sup>100</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 431

<sup>101</sup> Agnew, “Racism, the South, and the New Left,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 37, 38.

<sup>102</sup> Agnew, “Impudence in the Streets,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 44.

will be fed.” Antiwar leaders, said Agnew, were “ideological eunuchs” and “parasites of passion.”<sup>103</sup>

“Agnew Unleashed,” wrote *Time*, and stated that: “One of Spiro Agnew’s problems is simply candor. He is simply a blunt man with strong views.”<sup>104</sup> *Time* concluded that Agnew was following in his own boss Nixon’s footsteps and were now the Administration’s “pugilist.” In an interview conducted by *Newsweek*, which was quoted in the *New York Times*, Agnew defended his use of “punchy language.” “I suppose if you want to get a point across you say it in exciting language and then blend out everything else,” Agnew told the magazine.<sup>105</sup> “Of course, if you use punchy language you’re automatically attacked for intemperance. But that risk is counterbalanced by the attention you get for what you say. If you can get your thought through to the people, it can be worth the risk.”<sup>106</sup> Agnew also argued that there was no need for a politician like George Wallace anymore, and that the electorate in the South had voted for Wallace because they had “no place else to go.”<sup>107</sup>

On November 3, 1969, Nixon held his famous “Silent Majority” speech, in which he urged the American people to stand united in the matter of the war in Vietnam. The Moratorium against the War in Vietnam had gathered 300,000 demonstrators on October 15, and 500,000 were expected to protest on November 15. Nixon argued that while the antiwar demonstrations were quite visible, they were after all a minority. “But as President of the United States, I would be untrue to my oath of office to be dictated by a minority who hold that view and who try to

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<sup>103</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 432; Agnew, “Impudence in the Streets,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 44-51.

<sup>104</sup> “The Vice Presidency: Agnew Unleashed,” *Time*, October 31, 1969, accessed March 31, 2012.  
<http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,839090,00.html>

<sup>105</sup> “Agnew Defends ‘Punchy Language,’” *New York Times*, October 27, 1969, accessed March 31, 2012.  
<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F20A10F63B55127B93C5AB178BD95F4D8685F9>

<sup>106</sup> “Agnew Defends ‘Punchy Language’”

<sup>107</sup> “Agnew Defends ‘Punchy Language’”

impose it on the nation by mounting demonstrations in the street.” “So tonight, to you, the great – silent – majority of my fellow Americans – I ask for your support,” Nixon said to the American people.<sup>108</sup>

In the days following the speech, fifty thousand telegrams and thirty thousand letters arrived at the White House praising the Silent Majority speech. In an instant poll, 77 percent said they supported Nixon’s handling of Vietnam, it had been 58 percent before the speech, and only 6 percent opposed Nixon’s handling outright. Still, the media controlled the microphones, and they were, Nixon was convinced, out to get him. The three major networks’ experts went on the air immediately after the speech, and their analysis did not come out in support for Nixon.<sup>109</sup>

Nixon’s staff, with Nixon’s speechwriter Pat Buchanan in lead, decided that Agnew in his new role as the White House “bulldog” should go after the media. In a televised speech held at the Regional Republican Conference in Des Moines on November 13, Agnew accused the three networks of presenting the news with a liberal bias. He also claimed the television medium was exaggerating and “dramatizing the horrors of war.”<sup>110</sup> It was a broadsided attack on former U.S. Ambassador to the Paris peace talk and an outspoken critic of the Nixon Administration’s policy, W. Averell Harriman who commented on the speech for ABC.<sup>111</sup> Agnew named anchorman David Brinkley personally, and others were highly recognizable.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 435.

<sup>109</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 436, 437.

<sup>110</sup> Agnew, “The Responsibilities of Television,” in *Frankly Speaking*, 44-51.

<sup>111</sup> William M. Hammond, *Public Affairs: The Military and the Media, 1968-1973*, (Washington D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1996), 158, accessed August 31, 2012.

[http://books.google.no/books?id=0N4FFGczwNMC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.no/books?id=0N4FFGczwNMC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false)

<sup>112</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 438, 439.

Walter Cronkite of CBS called the speech “an implied threat to freedom of speech,” while Julian Goodman of NBC said it was an attempt to “deny to TV freedom of the press.”<sup>113</sup> Though, notes Rick Perlstein, when the peace demonstrators gathered in Washington D.C. two days later the three networks’ live cameras were noticeably absent.<sup>114</sup>

“O, Lord Give Us Patience – Right Now” was the headline of an article by *New York Times*’ columnist James Reston, three days later. “[Agnew] says nasty things in the nicest way,” wrote Reston.<sup>115</sup> And, “If he were obscure, he might be a problem, but he says such silly things in such vivid language that even commentators know what he means.”<sup>116</sup> Reston followed suit a week later with an article titled “Are you an Agnewstic?” “The big new cult in Washington now is Agnewsticism. To be in the inner, inner circle of the Administration, you have to be an Agnewstic which is defined as one who disbelieves anything printed or broadcast east of the Ohio River.”<sup>117</sup> Agnew, writes Reston, unlike most of the other “Republican disciples” had “something plain to say, which he said directly and even with certain elegance.” “His goal was to arouse the ‘silent majority’ but he got them in full cry, and in a language which would make even a Chicago Democrat blush.”<sup>118</sup>

Shortly after the Des Moines speech, *Time* published a thorough analysis of Agnew’s time in the White House and his new role in the Administration. Agnew is the “King’s taster –

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<sup>113</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 439.

<sup>114</sup> Perlstein, *Nixonland*, 440.

<sup>115</sup> James Reston, “Washington: ‘O, Lord, Gives Us Patience – Right Now!’” *New York Times*, November 16, 1969, accessed March 31, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F30F1FFA345D13728DDDAF0994D9415B898AF1D3>; Reston was briefly mentioned in Agnew’s television speech and allegedly on Nixon’s “enemies in the press-list.” See <http://www.colorado.edu/AmStudies/lewis/film/enemies.htm>

<sup>116</sup> Reston, “O, Lord, Gives Us Patience – Right Now!”

<sup>117</sup> James Reston, “Washington: Are You Agnewstic?” *New York Times*, November 23, 1969, accessed March 31, 2012. <http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F70714F9395C1A7B93C1AB178AD95F4D8685F9>

<sup>118</sup> Reston, “Are You Agnewstic?”

sampling the public's ideological moods," argued *Time*.<sup>119</sup> Whereas George Wallace courted and spoke for the white working-class, Agnew represented the middle-class. "He speaks with the authentic voice of Americans who are angry and frightened by what has happened to their culture."<sup>120</sup> According to *Time*, the public found Agnew entertaining, but was not sure of him as a politician. "A reaction that is common among many [...] Americans is a-you-can't-be-serious-grin."<sup>121</sup> The article in *Time* was overall positive, Agnew was described as essentially good-humored, but *Time* was still worried about the emerging political rhetoric.

Agnew delivers a sort of .45-cal. prose – heavy, highly charged, often inaccurate and dangerous. If students and liberals are disposed to an apocalyptic vision of America as a runaway, cancerous technocracy, Agnew's audiences are suggestible to his appeals to a "Love It or Leave It" America. In Harrisburg, Pa., two weeks ago, Agnew attacked the more militant dissidents as "vultures" and declared: "We can afford to separate them from our society with no more regret than we should feel over discarding rotten apples from a barrel." What did he mean by separation? Expulsion? Concentration camps?<sup>122</sup>

*Time* appointed "The Middle Americans" to "Man and Woman of the Year" in 1969. "The culture no longer seems to supply many heroes, but Middle Americans admire men like Neil Armstrong, and to some extent, Spiro Agnew," said *Time*.<sup>123</sup>

Finally, renowned historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., weighed in on the spectacle surrounding the vice president. In a several pages long essay called "The Amazing Success Story of 'Spiro Who?'" published on July 26, 1970 in the *New York Times* Schlesinger sought to get the bottom of the "Agnew-factor."

What, in fact, is it all about? After 16 months, no can question the force of Spiro T. Agnew's personality, nor the impact of his speeches, nor his Midas talent as fund-raiser

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<sup>119</sup> "Spiro Agnew: The King's Taster," *Time Magazine*, November 14, 1969, accessed April 28, 2012, accessed April 28, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,840345,00.html>

<sup>120</sup> "The King's Taster"

<sup>121</sup> "The King's Taster"

<sup>122</sup> "The King's Taster"

<sup>123</sup> "Man and Woman of the Year: The Middle Americans," *Time*, January 05, 1970, accessed April 28, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,943113,00.html>



for his party, nor his rare skill in rejoicing his friends, infuriating his enemies and confounding the press, nor his astonishing success in transmuting himself from a buffoon and bumbler, complete with malapropism and pratfalls, into a formidable political figure. The question remains: What does the Agnew phenomenon mean?<sup>124</sup>

In analyzing Agnew, Schlesinger sensed the growing “culture war.” Agnew, wrote Schlesinger, was not in the usual sense a political figure. He was a politician by trade, but regular politics such as budget or welfare programs seemed to bore him. The same could be said of foreign affairs. Agnew’s heart was in cultural politics and not public policy. “He has emerged as a villain, not in the battle of programs but in the battle of life styles.”<sup>125</sup> Schlesinger widely deliberated on Agnew’s rhetorical style. The vice president has a “distinctive” and “arresting” style. His masculine humor is of “the men’s locker-room variety. ‘You can’t hit my team in the groin and expect me to smile about it,’ he will say, or, in reference to the skeptical press, ‘some newspapers are fit only to line the bottom of bird cages.’”<sup>126</sup>

The fact that Agnew was second generation Greek immigrant is almost with no exception always mentioned in the articles written about him during the height of his career. The price for Agnew’s fame was high, writes Michael Novak: “Many in the media see him as buffoon. His assigned role was, play Nixon’s Nixon; draw off hostility; attract the barb and jokes; be ‘blowtorch,’ ‘divider,’ fall guy. It was a role most acutely difficult. Immigrants from southern Europe receive no lack of insults, have small internal margin for accepting ridicule.”<sup>127</sup> It was especially problematic for Agnew to be mocked by the media, argues Novak, because southern

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<sup>124</sup> Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., “The Amazing Success Story of ‘Spiro Who?,”” *New York Times*, July 26, 1970, accessed March 31, 2012.

<http://query.nytimes.com/mem/archive/pdf?res=F20817FA3C5B137A93C4AB178CD85F448785F9>

<sup>125</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., “The Amazing Success Story of ‘Spiro Who?’”

<sup>126</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., “The Amazing Success Story of ‘Spiro Who?’”

<sup>127</sup> Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, 138, 139.

European immigrants were already of low status. That is why, according to Novak, one could “feel resentment sizzling” behind Agnew’s colorful phrases.<sup>128</sup>

The relationship between Nixon and Agnew was at best ambivalent. It reached a climax in March, 1970 when the two appeared for an amusing piano duet at the Gridiron Club. No matter what tunes Nixon tried to play, Agnew would drown him out with “Dixie,” until they both joined in “God Bless America” as a finale.<sup>129</sup> Their friendship cooled down after this. Agnew even went as far as to publicly criticize Nixon on several occasions. By September, accusations that Agnew had taken part in corruption could no longer be ignored. Reluctantly, presumably almost by force, he entered a plea bargain with the federal prosecutors and on October 10, 1973 he resigned. Nixon appointed House Republican Leader Gerald R. Ford as Agnew’s replacement. Agnew was astounded by the laughter and cheerfulness of the televised event that “seemed like a celebration of a great election victory – not the aftermath of a stunning tragedy.”<sup>130</sup>

## Conclusion

Professor of Journalism Rodger Streitmatter, argues that Limbaugh’s unique “blend of bedrock conservatism with a sledgehammer sense of humor created what previously would have been an oxymoron: a funny conservative.”<sup>131</sup> A look at the political careers of George Wallace and Spiro Agnew prove otherwise.<sup>132</sup> Wallace, who not only knew how to adjust himself accordingly to the medium, whether to be “cool” for television or “hot” during his campaign speeches, contributed

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<sup>128</sup> Novak, *Unmeltable Ethnics*, 140.

<sup>129</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>130</sup> Hatfield, *Vice Presidents of the United States*.

<sup>131</sup> Streitmatter, “Rush Limbaugh – Leading the republican Revolution,” 208.

<sup>132</sup> Wallace was a Southern Democrat, but ran for president as an Independent in 1968, and as a Democrat in 1972. For the sake of the argument I will refer to him as ‘conservative.’

to blurring the line between politics and entertainment with rallies reminiscent of rock concerts. His repetitive “snarling sarcastic attacks” on the government and other parts of the establishment became “acts” his followers could watch over and over again.<sup>133</sup>

“Limbaugh sounds like he is standing on a soap-box,” wrote the *New York Times*’ Lewis Grossberger in 1990, referring to the politician’s in Wallace’s generation.<sup>134</sup> It is not hard to hear the echo of Wallace when Limbaugh claims that “liberalism poisons the soul” and that “modern-day liberalism is like a disease.”<sup>135</sup> Nor when he addresses the “liberal elites” contempt for his audience: “You are called selfish and greedy. Your desire to live a moral life and teach your children virtue is laughed at, sneered at, scorned. And the worst of it is, you are the ones who have to pick up the pieces and pay more taxes for yet another program when the liberal experiments fail once again.” Though, wrote Dan T. Carter in 1996, “George Wallace would probably come across as a mealy-mouthed moderate when juxtaposed against today’s right-wing-radical talk show hosts.”<sup>136</sup> While not mentioning Limbaugh specifically, it can be noted that in the 1990s “right-wing-radical talk show host” was a euphemism for Rush Limbaugh.<sup>137</sup>

Similar to Rush Limbaugh in the early 1990s, the media helped fuel the “Agnew phenomenon.” The press’ sometimes mocking articles, only fired up Agnew’s, and later Limbaugh’s, followers. While journalists ridiculed Agnew’s bluntness, the voters identified Agnew as someone who spoke out about what they believed. The Goldwater campaign showed

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<sup>133</sup> The similarities between Wallace and Limbaugh are sometimes uncanny. They share an extreme repetitiveness (Limbaugh’s show, and many of his lines, have remained unchanged for 24 years), a constant twitching of the hands when speaking, and a fear of real intimacy (preferring to speak to followers from a distance). In addition they both suffered/suffer from deafness.

<sup>134</sup> Lewis Grossberger, “The Rush Hour,” *New York Times*, December 16, 1990, accessed January 4, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/16/magazine/the-rush-hours.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

<sup>135</sup> Limbaugh, *See, I Told You So*, 87.

<sup>136</sup> Dan T. Carter, “Legacy of Rage: George Wallace and the Transformation of American Politics,” *The Journal of Southern History*, 62:1 (1996), 3-26.

<sup>137</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 89.

that a message corresponding with the electorate was not enough – how the message was delivered was equally important. Agnew was keenly aware of how language and humor are powerful instruments in getting a political message across. “I suppose if you want to get a point across you say it in exciting language and then blend out everything else,” Agnew told *Newsweek*, defending his pompous rhetorical style.<sup>138</sup> Whereas Wallace was crude, Agnew refined what would later become Rush Limbaugh’s trade mark: a combination of aggression and masculine humor. Agnew’s style resonated with the voters in a way that *Time* dubbed him “the King’s taster” – someone who is sampling the public’s mood. In a wider sense, that description also fits Limbaugh.

“Sensitivity to being looked down on” is a key factor in this matter. Wallace’s experiences as a child and young adult shaped his personality and worldview. It gave him an understanding for the sentiments among the white working-class. Agnew did everything in his power to assimilate prior to becoming a phenomenon. Yet, when he reached the top, the mentioning of his Greek background was never far away. This made his voice “sizzle with resentment” if we are to believe Michael Novak. Limbaugh comes from a prosperous family who by definition belonged to the in-crowd. Still, Limbaugh was always deeply insecure and struggled to be accepted by his peers. It has given him an ear for the dissatisfaction many Americans feel toward what right-wing conservatives call “the liberal establishment.”

As the media has become more dominant, it is evident that successful politicians need the skills of an entertainer. In the entertainment industry, one talks of having the “x-factor.” The “x-factor” is not to have the best singing voice or to be the best looking actor, but rather to inhabit an undefinable “it.” “It” can be translated into magnetism or charisma – an ability to hold the

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<sup>138</sup> “Agnew Defends ‘Punchy Language’”

audience's attention. It is perhaps not a coincidence that it was former movie actor Ronald Reagan who merged and refined the political messages of Wallace and Nixon. Reagan was known as the great communicator. Edsall and Edsall argue that the G.O.P. actively sought new and innovating ways to communicate with its constituency in the 1980s. Something or someone who could deliver the party's message in a style which resonated with the working-class and possibly at the same time act as the "King's taster" was needed – and along came Rush Limbaugh. The question is whether Limbaugh's bombastic style would have been so well received by his audience had not George Wallace and Spiro Agnew paved the way before him.

## Chapter Three: The Life of Rush Limbaugh

Rush Limbaugh struggled for many years before becoming a popular media personality. He portrays himself – and is viewed by his followers – as an American success story. Limbaugh has intentionally created a superior, know-it-all public persona who is, by his own accounts, never wrong. Yet much of Limbaugh's appeal among his fans is founded in vulnerability: Limbaugh openly tells his audience of former career failings, his weight problems, and the complex relationship he had with his late father. He bases his political opinions on anecdotes from his personal life – his failings are largely due to the liberals, and his success because of conservatism. In this chapter I look at Limbaugh's family background and on how his past has helped shape him into the person he is today. Furthermore, I examine the main influences behind Limbaugh's radio persona and, finally, discuss how Limbaugh's personal life has contributed to his appeal amongst his followers.

### Family Background

Rush Hudson Limbaugh III was born in 1951 into a Republican family in Cape Girardeau, Missouri. The Limbaugh family is of German and Dutch extraction and immigrated to Pennsylvania in the 1750s. The family has several ties to the American Revolution. Limbaugh's grandfather, Rush H. Limbaugh, Sr., held a seat in the Missouri Legislature and was an elected member of the Missouri House of Representatives. In 1936 he was a delegate to the Republican National Committee who elected Alf Landon, who in turn lost to Franklin D. Roosevelt. In Cape Girardeau the courthouse is named after him, and the family is referred to as "town royalty." Rush Limbaugh's uncle, Stephen N. Limbaugh was appointed U.S. District judge by Ronald

Reagan, and his cousin Stephen N. Limbaugh, Jr. was appointed to the Supreme Court of Missouri by George W. Bush.<sup>139</sup>

Limbaugh's father, Rush "Big Rush" Limbaugh, Jr., was a World War II combat pilot and a prominent local attorney, who was known for his strong political opinions. Limbaugh, Jr. was a passionate Republican and a noted political orator who often gave speeches on patriotic holidays. Like his father, Rush Limbaugh, Jr. was a leading figure in the local Republican Party, and in 1956 he proudly hosted vice president Richard Nixon and his wife on their visit to Southeast Missouri. He was regarded a pillar of the American Legion, the Veteran of Foreign Wars, and the Rotary Club, in addition to teaching Sunday School at his local Methodist Church. Limbaugh's mother, Mildred Carolyn "Millie" Armstrong Limbaugh dabbled with show business in her younger days, and was a singer on the radio in Chicago before she got married. She was also the clown in the family. "I don't want to brag," she once said to *Time*, "but I say he got his sense from his dad and his nonsense from me."<sup>140</sup>

"Big Rush" would lecture Limbaugh, his younger brother David Limbaugh, and their friends on the evils of Communism and liberalism. Limbaugh's childhood friends have vivid memories of his father watching TV and yelling at the reporters: "They're all typical liberals," he would shout, "and [Dan] Rather's the worst one in the bunch."<sup>141</sup> Another friend of Limbaugh remembers lively political discussions at the dinner table in the Limbaugh house. Limbaugh Jr. was consumed by political science and was always educating his two sons about politics and

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<sup>139</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 10-13; Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 1,2.

<sup>140</sup> Richard Corliss, "Conservative Provocateur or Big Blowhard?," *Time*, October 26, 1992, accessed April 28, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,976838,00.html>

<sup>141</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 16.

patriotism.<sup>142</sup> He was known to be very strict, and would often call out Limbaugh and his younger brother in front of their friends and yell at them using “a string of expletives.”<sup>143</sup>

In the Limbaugh family being a Republican was part of the family’s identity. The Limbaugh’s had the town’s Republican law firm, and for twenty years the Limbaugh family led the local opposition against the Democratic presidents. It was not until 1952 with President Eisenhower that the balance of power shifted over to the Republicans. According to Rush Limbaugh his father agreed with President Harry Truman on several issues, but would never have voted for him.<sup>144</sup> Limbaugh, Jr. was considered to be a black sheep, David Limbaugh told *Time*. “He was a maverick, the lone, passionate voice of conservatism. My brother’s success is a vindication of my father’s lifework in politics.”<sup>145</sup>

David Limbaugh, who became an attorney like his dad, is also a nationally syndicated columnist and a bestselling author of several conservative themed books.<sup>146</sup> Julie Limbaugh, who is the daughter of Stephen N. Limbaugh, Jr. and Limbaugh’s second cousin, told web magazine Salon.com that Rush Limbaugh’s rhetorical style closely resembles that of her father and the rest of the Limbaugh clan.<sup>147</sup>

Limbaugh hero-worshipped his father and still refers to him as “the smartest man I ever met” on the show and in his books. He did not, however, seem to be interested in politics when growing up, but his friends remember him as a good debater. Family members state that

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<sup>142</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 8.

<sup>143</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 16.

<sup>144</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 18.

<sup>145</sup> Corliss, “Conservative Provocateur or Big Blowhard?”

<sup>146</sup> “Human Events: David Limbaugh,” *Human Events*, accessed August 1, 2012. <http://www.humanevents.com/author/david-limbaugh/>

<sup>147</sup> Julie Limbaugh, “Rusty and Me,” *Salon.com*, April 1, 2009, accessed August 1, 2012. [http://www.salon.com/2009/04/01/rush\\_limbaugh\\_2/](http://www.salon.com/2009/04/01/rush_limbaugh_2/)



Limbaugh to a large degree echoes his father's opinions. There are few differences between the two, other than Limbaugh's controversial sense of humor.<sup>148</sup>

Limbaugh, who went by the name of "Rusty," was not an outcast growing up, but he was introverted and shy. He had a weight problem from a very young age, which affected his self-esteem. Paul D. Colford, Limbaugh's first biographer, argues that the feeling of being separated from the "hip" crowd was a factor in Limbaugh's zealous embrace of the Republican Party later on.<sup>149</sup> Speaking on his show in 1992, Limbaugh suggested that the GOP offered a refuge for him and other likeminded Americans:

The Republican Party is like a microcosm of those of us who are conservatives. Every day we are inundated by what is supposedly natural in this country, what is supposedly normal, what is supposedly in the majority, by virtue of what the dominant media culture shows us, and most often it is not us. Most often, what we believe in is made fun of, lampooned, impugned, and put down. Then, we don't want to feel that way. We want to feel as much a part of the mainstream as anybody else.<sup>150</sup>

The idea of the bullied conservative, who stands up against the mainstream, is an impression that Limbaugh nourishes. According to Colford, Limbaugh seemed to identify with the G.O.P. for reasons above and beyond those of his father. To Limbaugh, the G.O.P. became a metaphor for the way he saw himself growing up: "made fun of lampooned, impugned, and put down." The Republican Party was a safe haven for Limbaugh and his likeminded peers.

Young "Rusty's" affection for radio was driven by a desire to win acceptance. As a teenager Limbaugh filled the gap between himself and the popular kids by becoming a disc

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<sup>148</sup> Corliss, "Conservative Provocateur or Big Blowhard?"

<sup>149</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 5.

<sup>150</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 5.

jockey. Limbaugh wanted to be the guy playing everyone's favorite song, and he wanted to stand out.<sup>151</sup>

### Creating His Radio Persona

Limbaugh cites Muhammad Ali as his main influence in creating his public persona.<sup>152</sup>

Muhammad Ali is known as one of the first performers who “trash talked” his opponents before a fight. “Trash talk” refers to a form of boast or insult used to intimidate opposition in competitive sports. Like Limbaugh does on his radio show, Ali would invent disparaging nicknames for his opponents and predict his own victories. Limbaugh used to refer to Senator Edward ‘Ted’ Kennedy as “the swimmer,”<sup>153</sup> and former presidential candidate Michael Dukakis as “the loser.” Like Ali called himself “the Greatest,” Limbaugh typically opens his radio show by introducing himself “with talent on loan from God, this is Rush Limbaugh.” Over the years Limbaugh has intentionally created an ambiguous public personality, which makes him hard to understand.

Ali was a controversial public figure when he was Limbaugh's object of study; a political entertainer in his own right, he converted to Islam when it was immensely unpopular to do so. By refusing to serve in Vietnam, he became an important part of the civil rights movement and the anti-war movement. He often expressed himself in almost rhythmic sentences which remain famous, such as: “I ain't got no quarrel with those Vietcong – no Vietcong ever called me nigger,” and “floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee, his eyes can't hit what his eyes can't

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<sup>151</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 5.

<sup>152</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 7.

<sup>153</sup> “The swimmer” is a reference to an incident in 1969 where Senator Kennedy accidentally caused the death of a young female campaign aid. Driving home from a party, and influenced by alcohol, the Senator drove off a bridge. Kennedy managed to get out of the car and swim to shore, while his passenger drowned. He did not contact the authorities until the next morning.

see.”<sup>154</sup> Perhaps young Limbaugh dreamed of becoming a provocative public figure himself, standing up against the leading political party like his father and grandfather had done, before the power shift in American politics.

Limbaugh learned from Muhammad Ali how to draw and keep a crowd. Ali would often say highly inaccurate things about his opponents, like when he dubbed his opponent Sonny Liston as “the Big Ugly Bear” and referred to Joe Frazier as “Uncle Tom.”<sup>155</sup> The lesson from Ali might have been that as long as you keep the audience laughing and entertained, it does not matter if you break the rules for appropriate behavior. Ali was deemed as merely an entertainer by the press early in his career. Reporters often questioned if it was all an act, but by winning fights and holding the crowd’s attention he transformed the way professional boxing works. Limbaugh seems to look upon himself as some sort of rhetorical boxer who defeats his enemies in an intellectual combat “with half his brain tied behind his back – just to make it fair.”<sup>156</sup>

Limbaugh dreamed of becoming a radio star ever since he was a child. In the mid-sixties TV was still in its infancy, and in small towns like Cape Girardeau the fastest route to broadcast stardom was through the radio. At fourteen his parents bought him a “Remco Radio” set, which allowed for him to broadcast inside the house. He would play records on it and practice his disc jockey chatter, usually to an audience consisting of his encouraging mother. Coming from a family of prominent lawyers Limbaugh was expected to follow the same route, but he was an

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<sup>154</sup>“Muhammad Ali Biography,” accessed August 31, 2012.  
[http://www.biographyonline.net/sport/muhammad\\_ali.html](http://www.biographyonline.net/sport/muhammad_ali.html)

<sup>155</sup> “Muhammad Ali Biography.”

<sup>156</sup> Giselle Benatar, “Look Who’s Talk King,” *Entertainment Weekly*, accessed May 12, 2012.  
<http://www.ew.com/ew/article/0,,313275,00.html> ; Chafets, *An Army of One*, mid-section.

indifferent student, and his grades were not good enough to get into good college. Limbaugh's only ambition, according to himself, was to become a Top 40 disc jockey.<sup>157</sup>

Calling himself "Rusty Sharpe," Limbaugh started to develop his disc jockey persona at sixteen. In high school he got his first job as a radio host at a local radio station the family owned a share in. His father hated the idea, but he reluctantly paid for a six week long radio-engineering course that gave Limbaugh the government license needed to operate a radio studio without supervision. Every day, both weekdays and weekends, Limbaugh played music and "wisecracked" about current events. The show was popular among the other students. When asked in an interview with the high school newspaper why he had chosen "Rusty Sharpe" for his "radio personality" Limbaugh replied: "I wanted an adjective that had a double meaning – you know a pun thing. I just looked in the phone book and came up with Sharpe."<sup>158</sup>

In 1971 Limbaugh changed his "artist name" again, this time to "Bachelor Jeff" Christie. Limbaugh hated academia. He attended the Southeast Missouri State University – known to be a conservative bastion, but dropped out after a year.<sup>159</sup> At the age of twenty- one he moved to McKeesport, Pennsylvania, twelve miles from Pittsburgh, to work as a morning "drive-time" disc jockey. His job was to play music and deliver traffic reports, but he insisted upon telling jokes and "wisecracking" as well. He would make prank calls to for instance to the electric company and invent personalities. One of these personalities was "The Friar Shuck Radio Ministry of the Air," a "skit" which made fun of broadcasting evangelical preachers who ask

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<sup>157</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 22.

<sup>158</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 21.

<sup>159</sup> Leaving college technically made Limbaugh eligible for the Vietnam War draft lottery, but due to a physical condition known as a "pilonidal cyst" he effectively "beat the draft." See Colford *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 14-20.

their followers to send them money.<sup>160</sup> Limbaugh was considered popular and talented, but his controversial humor worried the radio station's management. In McKeesport he became a minor celebrity and was often invited to do appearances at charity and sports events.<sup>161</sup>

Since the seventies, edgy and controversial humor has become increasingly mainstream. In American broadcasting it is the radio disc jockeys who have been the forerunners in terms of provocative humor. In the early seventies, a type of disc jockeys called "shock jocks" began to appear on American radio. A "shock jock" is a radio host who attracts attention by using humor that most of the audience find offensive. Typical "shock jock" humor often includes sexual and "toilet" humor, insults, and defamation. "Shock jocks" have been known to "push the envelope" and disregard the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) rules. Many have been fired as punishment for loss of advertisers, or social and political outrage. However, they are most likely quickly rehired by another station or network.<sup>162</sup>

In the "shock jock" genre Howard Stern, Don Imus, and Larry Lujack have been the most prominent. Both Stern and Imus, like Limbaugh, started out as disc jockeys in the seventies, while Lujack, who is considered a pioneer in the field, began his career in the sixties. Limbaugh names Lujack as his greatest influence among radio hosts. Limbaugh has been compared to both Stern and Imus many times. Stern has always been far more vulgar than Limbaugh. While bad-mannered sketches are a small part of Limbaugh's show, they are the majority of Stern's. Stern

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<sup>160</sup> To this day, Limbaugh does not support evangelicals like Jerry Falwell. Bill Clinton at one point tried to lump Falwell and Limbaugh together, but the two have never met. Limbaugh have turned down repeated invitations to speak at Falwell's Liberty University. In 2009 Limbaugh declined an offer to speak at the Liberty graduation and receive an honorary degree. (Chafets 2010, 99)

<sup>161</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 21-28; Zev Chafets, *An Army of One*, 32-34.

<sup>162</sup> Jon Parales, "Radio View; Shock Jocks Shake Up Uncle Sam," *New York Times*, November 15, 1992, accessed March 31, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/11/15/arts/radio-view-shock-jocks-shake-up-uncle-sam.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>; Richard Zoglin, "Shock Jock," *Time*, November 30, 1992, accessed March 31, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,977117,00.html>

expresses some political views on his show but is not a political activist like Limbaugh.<sup>163</sup> Imus is perhaps closer to Limbaugh's right wing ideology. He was fired in an extensive broadcasting scandal in 2007 for calling a female basketball team "nappy headed [prostitutes]."<sup>164</sup> He was rehired by the *Fox Business Network* soon after.

Although Limbaugh was part of a trend, the economy was against him. The stock market crashed in 1973 and by the end of 1974 it had lost more than 45 percent of its value. Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh were hit especially hard. In addition to the entrance of the "shock jocks," radio in itself was changing too. FM radio was replacing AM and singles were being replaced by albums. Limbaugh, who broadcasts on AM, was credited for single-handedly reviving the AM band in the eighties. Today almost all "talk radio" is found on the AM band.<sup>165</sup> It was hard to get jobs in radio and Limbaugh spent almost a decade getting hired and then fired from several radio stations. Finally, he abandoned radio to work as a public relations assistant for the Kansas City Royals baseball team. His responsibilities ranged from putting together pocket schedules to arranging tickets for children's birthday parties. Despite the routine nature of the work, he stayed with the Kansas City Royals for five years – longer than he had worked at any of his radio jobs.<sup>166</sup>

When Limbaugh returned to radio in Kansas City in 1983, he initially simply read the news. After a while the radio station's management gave him the chance to prove himself as a commentator and talk-show host. Limbaugh experimented with outrageous on-air insults, and

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<sup>163</sup> Kurt Andersen, "Big Mouths," *Time*, November 1, 1993, accessed February 13, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,979470,00.html>

<sup>164</sup> James Poniewozik, "Imus Debuts on Fox Business; Talks Time; Drinking with Beck" *Time*, October 5, 2009, accessed February 13, 2012. <http://entertainment.time.com/2009/10/05/imus-debuts-on-fox-business-talks-time-drinking-with-beck/>

<sup>165</sup> Kurtz, "The Rush Hour," 231.

<sup>166</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 205.

worked hard to compete in the tough disc jockey field. His job at the station lasted for only ten months, but he had managed to catch the attention of another radio station, located in Sacramento.<sup>167</sup>

Disc jockeying is a trade like any other and Limbaugh was continuously developing his on-air persona. He wanted to be a “personality DJ” and “the reason people listen to the radio.”<sup>168</sup> His former bosses recollect his bombast. He was known as someone who would bend the rules.<sup>169</sup> In addition to working on his radio persona, he was always keeping up with the latest broadcasting technology but also after getting rid of his regional accent, which Limbaugh found very difficult, he developed his voice into his finest tool. When he got his own show in Sacramento, he had a large selection of signature and theme music, which he had been collecting over a long period of time. All these tools were necessary for success, but not sufficient. No one at the time was doing right-wing populist satire, which became Limbaugh’s road to success.<sup>170</sup>

In 1984 Limbaugh was hired as “shock jock” Morton Downey Jr.’s replacement. Downey was a radio talk show host in Sacramento in the 1980s. His style was a combination of “shock jock” and right-wing populist commentary. He laid the groundwork for aggressive opinion based talk radio. Downey would persistently deride anyone with a liberal view. He later became a pioneer in so-called “trash TV” talk shows. While still on the radio Downey was popular and drew big audiences and national attention for his show. Eventually he got fired for saying racist

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<sup>167</sup> Rodger Streitmatter, “Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution,” 205.

<sup>168</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God*, 22.

<sup>169</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story: Talent on Loan from God*, 21-28.

<sup>170</sup> Chafets, *Rush Limbaugh: An Army of One*, 47.

things about his opponents on air. Limbaugh was hired as his well-mannered replacement, as Downey had a much more aggressive style.<sup>171</sup>

Before he turned political, he was almost a-political. Limbaugh grew up in a time with great political changes, but did not show any interest or participated in any of them. The political causes of his time: the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, the feminist revolution, political assassinations, Watergate, Jimmy Carter, not even Reagan engaged him until he reached his mid-thirties. None of his former roommates or closest friends remember him talking about politics.<sup>172</sup> When finding his specialty he echoed his father's doctrines and combined them with the Reagan conservatism of the eighties. He used his disc jockey training to express his political views. Limbaugh unquestionably hit a nerve with the audience with both his style and his politics.

*The Rush Limbaugh Show* was an instant success. Limbaugh's radio persona which had been evolving since the early days of "Rusty Sharpe" flourished in Sacramento. The station let him go on the air solo without any sidekicks or guests, which was highly unusual, and encouraged his very personal right-wing monologues. From the very beginning he was on the air three hours every weekday, as he is now. He perfected his satirical style and introduced many of the "skits" and terms he still performs like "Feminazi"<sup>173</sup> and "Drive-by-media."<sup>174</sup> Although California was still considered to be a liberal state, he had high ratings. "Sharp edged, but good humored," said the local reviews.<sup>175</sup> Limbaugh's show soon earned national recognition, and he started to get syndication offers. The term syndication refers to the sale of the right to broadcast a radio show or a television show – a syndicated radio show is a show that is broadcasted on

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<sup>171</sup> Zev Chafets, *An Army of One*, 41.

<sup>172</sup> Zev Chafets, *An Army of One*, 48, 49.

<sup>173</sup> "Feminazi": "A woman to whom the most important thing in life is seeing to it that as many abortions as possible is performed." See Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 193.

<sup>174</sup> "Drive-By-Media": The mainstream media.

<sup>175</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 42.



multiple radio stations. In 1988 Edward McLaughlin, the former president of *ABC Radio*, created *Excellence in Broadcasting Network* (EIB Network) and hired Limbaugh as his star. On August 1, 1988, at the age of 37, Limbaugh was nationally syndicated.<sup>176</sup>

## Success

Limbaugh's success was not limited to radio. In the first half of the 1990s, Limbaugh was everywhere. By 1990 he had 20 million listeners – in the mid-1990s the number had risen to 25 million. He was by far the most listened to radio commentator in the country. To further connect with his fans he went on a sold out tour, *The Rush to Excellence Tour*, in 1991. In 1992 the nationally syndicated *Rush Limbaugh: The Television Show* started airing on cable networks across the country. Media critics strongly criticized Limbaugh's show, but it was soon competing well against major network offerings such as *Nightline* and *The Today Show*.<sup>177</sup> Although the show was popular Limbaugh decided to cancel it in 1996. Limbaugh did not enjoy being on TV, and has stated that he prefers the solitude of the radio studio.<sup>178</sup>

A month after launching his TV show, Limbaugh entered print media. He started distributing the *Limbaugh Letter*, a monthly newsletter which is still in circulation. The popularity of the newsletter ascended, and with over 500,000 subscriptions it surpassed veteran conservative magazines such as *National Review* and *Human Events*.<sup>179</sup> In 1992 he published his first book *The Way Things Ought to Be*, which sold more than 4.5 million copies. The 1993 sequel *See, I Told You So* sold more than 2.6 million copies and was a huge success as well. By

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<sup>176</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 206.

<sup>177</sup> Kurtz, "The Rush Hour," 238, 239.

<sup>178</sup> Chafetz, *An Army of One*, 58-61.

<sup>179</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 207.

the end of 1994 there were an estimated 7.5 million copies of Limbaugh's books, either in print or in the hands of his followers.<sup>180</sup>

Limbaugh's core constituency was white lower- and middle-class men, but his appeal reached beyond this demographic. The opinion leading conservative magazine *National Review* called Limbaugh as "the first rock star" of right-wing politics.<sup>181</sup>

The mainstream media contributed to his triumph. He was a phenomenon. He did appearances as a guest on ABC's *Nightline* and NBC's *Meet the Press* which helped Limbaugh reach an even wider audience. The major newspapers ran feature articles on him, although in a sarcastic tone. The *Chicago Tribune* used the headline "Motormouth," while the *Washington Post* accompanied its profile with an image of a corpulent court jester with the snout of a pig.<sup>182</sup> Mocking articles only fired up his followers, and gave Limbaugh arguments in his ongoing attacks on the "liberal media."

Limbaugh was even a pioneer on the Internet.<sup>183</sup> Considering himself to be a "rule-breaker" he did not want to limit his communication to traditional media. He had always been interested in future technology, and in 1991 the *CompuServe* computer bulletin board created the *Rush Limbaugh Forum*. *CompuServe* thereby gave its 2 million subscribers an electronic "Rush Room" where they could converse with each other, trade information, and mobilize for political action. The forum allowed fans to contact him directly, and he spent his free time looking through the approximately 600 e-mail messages sent to him daily. Limbaugh's wealth advanced

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<sup>180</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 64.

<sup>181</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 208.

<sup>182</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 209.

<sup>183</sup> Likewise, Limbaugh was a pioneer in "Internet-streaming." His show could be streamed on the Internet as early as 1999. See Matthew J. Rosenberg, Media Talk; Rush Limbaugh Brings His Show to the Internet, *New York Times*, March 8, 1999. Accessed September 5, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1999/03/08/business/media-talk-rush-limbaugh-brings-his-show-to-the-internet.html>

along with his popularity. By 1995 he was merchandising coffee mugs, T-shirts, calendars, neckties, and made personal appearances at the cost of \$25 000 each time.<sup>184</sup> After he moved to Florida in 1997, he purchased his own airplane, the *EIB One*, named after his own company, *Excellence in Broadcasting*.<sup>185</sup>

In 2008, Limbaugh signed a record-breaking \$400 million eight year contract keeping him employed through 2016. Traditional radio broadcasters have been losing listeners to competing technologies such as Internet streaming, satellite radio, and podcasting and have thus been in decline since 2001. This deal with *Clear Channel Communication Inc.* underscored Limbaugh's continued position as the leading purveyor of political talk radio.<sup>186</sup>

Granted that Limbaugh had no formal education, other than high school, he was quickly taken into the elite circles of the Republican Party. Soon he was socializing with prominent conservative intellectuals like William F. Buckley, Norman Podhoretz, Richard Brookhiser, and former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, all of who were fans of Limbaugh. At first Limbaugh felt uneasy among this crowd because he feared he lacked knowledge and sophistication, but he was welcomed with open arms. Limbaugh was a longtime admirer of Buckley, and his father had subscribed to Buckley's conservative magazine *National Review* since the late fifties. Some of Buckley's friends viewed him as crude and unpolished, but the protection from Buckley was more than sufficient in order to silence any protests.<sup>187</sup> Buckley, who was the original

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<sup>184</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution," 209.

<sup>185</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 122.

<sup>186</sup> Brian Stelter, "A Lucrative Deal for Rush Limbaugh," *New York Times*, July 3, 2008, accessed July 15, 2012. [http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/business/media/03radio.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/03/business/media/03radio.html?_r=1); Paul Farhi, "Limbaugh Signs \$400 Million Radio Deal," *Washington Post*, July 3, 2008, accessed July 15, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/02/AR2008070202063.html>; Radio personality Howard Stern signed a \$500 million contract with Sirius Satellite Radio in 2004, but contrary to Limbaugh's deal, Stern's contract included expenses and staff. See <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2010/12/09/howard-sterns-sirius-deal-the-400-million-contract.html>

<sup>187</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 56, 57.

“trailblazer in entertaining, eager-to-offend conservatism,”<sup>188</sup> and a talk show host himself, might have seen Limbaugh as his successor.

In December 1992, a month after Bill Clinton was elected president, Limbaugh even received a fan letter from former President Ronald Reagan. Reagan wrote:

Thanks for all you're doing to promote Republican and conservative principles. Now that I've retired from active politics, I don't mind that you've become the number one voice for conservatism in our country. I know that the liberals call you “the most dangerous man in America,” but don't worry they used to say the same thing about me. Keep up the good work! America needs to hear “the way things ought to be.”<sup>189</sup>

It was signed “Ron.” For Limbaugh this was a crucial acknowledgment. At the time Limbaugh had considerable political and cultural power, but was still, on a deeply personal level, insecure. His early career failings, and the constant disapproval from his father, had made him doubt he really deserved a place in the conservative movement and the national media. He told William Buckley many times that since his father died in 1990, Buckley had become a father figure for him. Thus the validation from Buckley, and especially Reagan “the greatest president of the twentieth century” was critically important and something Limbaugh would cherish forever.<sup>190</sup>

Limbaugh's career was going great, but his personal life was a mess. His second wife filed for divorce after the couple moved from Sacramento to New York. Limbaugh told a woman

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<sup>188</sup> Richard Corliss, “Look Who's Talking,” *Time*, Jan 23, 1995, accessed April 28, 2012.  
<http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,982262,00.html>

<sup>189</sup> “Letter from Ronald Reagan to Rush Limbaugh,” December 11, 1992, accessed May 11, 2012.  
[http://download.premiereradio.net/guest/rushlimb/LimbaughMuseum/Iphone2/PRELOAD\\_Outside.html](http://download.premiereradio.net/guest/rushlimb/LimbaughMuseum/Iphone2/PRELOAD_Outside.html)

<sup>190</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 60; After a television special about Reagan on Limbaugh's television show in 1994, Reagan sent him a second letter, thanking him “for the trip down memory lane.” Reagan wrote: “You are the backbone of our great nation, solely responsible for the success of our worldwide crusade.” See “Letter from Ronald Reagan to Rush Limbaugh,” October, 13, 1994.  
[http://download.premiereradio.net/guest/rushlimb/LimbaughMuseum/Iphone2/PRELOAD\\_Outside.html](http://download.premiereradio.net/guest/rushlimb/LimbaughMuseum/Iphone2/PRELOAD_Outside.html)

he did not know in an e-mail message on *CompuServe* that he was “in an interminable funk, no end in sight, listless, uninspired, and self-flagellating.”<sup>191</sup>

Being a successful media personality proved to be different than Limbaugh had imagined. Limbaugh was by all accounts a very popular talk show host, but was met with skepticism by his colleagues. Limbaugh had arrived in New York believing there was an elite club of broadcasters in the big city, who would recognize his ability and talent and welcome him into their circle but apart from Tim Russert and Ted Koppel, none of the mainstream broadcasters welcomed Limbaugh. The broadcast elite Limbaugh was referring to still exists, though it is somewhat watered down. They operate with connections to each other (not always friendly), and with other important people in the arts and entertainment industry, the news business, politics, publishing, academia, and Wall Street. Insiders are eligible for prizes and awards, college commencement speaking jobs, social respectability, and front-row-center seats. Broadcasters from outside the East Coast area have been invited in many times: Walter Cronkite, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings were from the Mid-West and Canada (Jennings). But, to become a member of the club you had to be secular, socially liberal, “Ivy League,” and more often than not, express opinions from the editorial pages of the *New York Times*. In this crowd, Limbaugh was not regarded as acceptable.<sup>192</sup> It seems naïve that Limbaugh who ridiculed members of the mainstream media aggressively – often on a personal level – thought he would become one of them. The hurt he felt by this rejection reflects on how he viewed himself as an entertainer first and foremost and a political activist second. His feelings might have been reinforced by the experiences of not being accepted during his childhood and adolescent.

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<sup>191</sup> Kurtz, “The Rush Hour,” 238.

<sup>192</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 49, 50.

## The Male Equivalent to Oprah

In 1997 Limbaugh decided to move from New York to Palm Beach in Florida. He had never become the celebrity he wished to be, and in New York – a city known for its liberal views – strangers were often rude to him in public. Florida seemed like a better location. He moved his show, including some of his staff down to Palm Beach. In the aftermath of the 2000 election Limbaugh was broadcasting from Florida, the center of the Bush/Gore controversy. Bush was a friend of Limbaugh and Gore had been a nemesis for years, so the audience expected Limbaugh to attack the matter aggressively. Instead, listeners complained that Limbaugh sounded tired, distracted, and “fuzzy” on the air.<sup>193</sup>

It turned out, as he told his audience in the autumn of 2001, that Limbaugh was almost completely deaf. His hearing had been declining for a long time due to a genetic hearing loss disease, known as autoimmune inner-ear disease (AIED). Limbaugh could no longer hear radio, including his own voice or music. For years he had been using powerful hearing aids, and when these stopped working, he had continued to broadcast with the help of a stenographer. He told the audience that he had decided to gamble on a cochlear implant. The procedure was irreversible and there was nothing the doctors could do if it did not work. The device worked and Limbaugh was back on the air full-time by the start of 2003.<sup>194</sup>

In October 2003 the *National Enquirer* broke a sensational story: Rush Limbaugh, the voice of right-wing America, was a drug addict and might be going to prison. The source of the story was Limbaugh’s housekeeper between 1997 and 2001. She had provided the illegal

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<sup>193</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 93.

<sup>194</sup> Bill Carter, “Limbaugh Tells Listeners He’s Nearly Deaf, *New York Times*, October 9, 2001, accessed July 15, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/10/09/us/limbaugh-tells-listeners-he-s-nearly-deaf.html>; Richard Corliss, “Hear Today, Gone Tomorrow,” *Time*, October 12, 2001, accessed July 15, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,179428,00.html>; Chafets, *An Army of One*, 93.

substances for Limbaugh, based on her husband's pain killer prescription. Limbaugh had been abusing prescription drugs since 1996. According to Limbaugh he had become addicted to pain killers after a spinal surgery. He had checked himself into rehabilitation programs twice, but failed to finish the treatment. Members of his family and some old friends had planned an intervention, but the plans fell through because no one was willing to confront Limbaugh. The state of Florida started a criminal investigation, and if he was found guilty Limbaugh faced up to five years in prison.<sup>195</sup>

On October 10, 2003, he went on the air and tried to explain what had happened to the audience.

I have always tried to be honest with you and open about my life. So I need to tell you today that part of what you have heard or read is correct. I am addicted to prescription pain medication. [...] I am not making any excuses. You know, over the years, athletes and celebrities have emerged from treatment centers to great fanfare and praise for conquering great demons. They are said to be great role models and examples for others. Well, I am no role model. I am no victim and do not portray myself as such. I take full responsibility for my problem.<sup>196</sup>

Shortly after the story broke, Limbaugh checked himself into a hospital and finished the treatment successfully. The legal issues lasted until 2006, when Limbaugh was found guilty of "doctor shopping" and sentenced to 18 months' probation.<sup>197</sup>

With his male audience, Limbaugh has a position which in many ways is equal to the one Oprah Winfrey has with women. There are also other striking similarities. They are both media innovators who have had large audiences over a long period of time. Both Limbaugh and Winfrey are cultural and political figures as well as entertainers. And they both use their personal

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<sup>195</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 94-96; Jacques Steinberg, Limbaugh Signs On Again, Sharing Life's Tough Lessons, *New York Times*, November 18, 2003, accessed August 2, 2012.

<http://www.nytimes.com/2003/11/18/arts/limbaugh-signs-on-again-sharing-life-s-tough-lessons.html>

<sup>196</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Chafets, *An Army of One*, 95.

<sup>197</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 96.

experiences to create emotional bonds with their followers who idolize them. They have both discussed repeatedly their struggle with weight issues and other personal problems.

Limbaugh uses his earlier career failing to relate with his listeners, but also to promote his political beliefs:

The truth is, I have worked in radio for twenty two years (long enough to retire in some professions) and made no money to speak of in the first seventeen. In 1983, I was earning \$18, 000 per year – less than I was making ten years earlier while in Pittsburgh. I have been fired seven times. I have been broke twice. Those years I was with the Kansas City Royals were awful financially. The house payment and the MasterCard bill were due during the same period, leaving me no cash for the period. [...] Back then I was lucky if I could earn a little extra doing a commercial. I understand how difficult it is for working people to keep their heads above water. That's why I am convinced that we must have a strong economy to enable as many as possible to provide themselves and their families. It's only people who have cushy jobs and don't work for a living who don't care if the economy is bad. That's how they can favor higher taxes and government spending that economists tell us can only slow down and cripple the private job-producing sector.<sup>198</sup>

Much like Winfrey, Limbaugh is also an inspiration to his audience. He is proof to his listeners that years of career failure and financial struggle do not mean one cannot become wealthy later in life. "Rush is a great American success story," wrote a fan of Limbaugh in an Internet discussion forum in 1995. "He has made millions, because he found a way to publicly state what most people (the mainstream) have believed and wanted to say all along, but have not had the opportunity to do so. Rush gives us that voice, and I will support him."<sup>199</sup>

In *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*, Janice Peck debates the importance of Winfrey's public persona in the building of Winfrey's media enterprise. While Limbaugh is sometimes credited with the power to influence the outcome of political elections, one of Winfrey's greatest accomplishments is her impact on America's reading habits, known as

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<sup>198</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 76,77

<sup>199</sup> Harold E. posting on the Usenet newsgroup alt.rush-limbaugh discussion forum, February 14, 1995, quoted in Land, "Sitting in Limbaugh: Bombast in Broadcasting," 227.



the “Oprah effect.” Through a segment on her talk show called *Oprah’s Book Club*, Winfrey discussed literary works she enjoyed and wanted her audience to read. Like Limbaugh contributed to demystifying conservative politics to a large audience,<sup>200</sup> Winfrey’s book club helped changing the perception that reading was hard and took much effort. She “[drew] all kinds of people into the book stores and [reassured] viewers that books are user-friendly and relevant to their lives.”<sup>201</sup> “High culture” was made available to the masses, like Limbaugh made national politics entertaining and easy to understand (if you shared his views). Winfrey used similar language as Limbaugh saying that she was not only “shaping and advocating cultural democracy in her push to get America reading again, but advancing on Old World privilege and elitism with her guerilla force of women readers behind her.”<sup>202</sup>

Much of Winfrey’s power lies in the fact that her audience sees her as a wise and empathetic counselor – in short a friend. An article in the *Los Angeles Times* about Winfrey’s book club referred to Winfrey as “the nation’s girlfriend.”<sup>203</sup> In addition to a reference to the way Winfrey’s fans regard her, this was also a play on her frequent use of the term to address viewers and guests.<sup>204</sup> The article quoted a fan whose perception of Oprah exemplified this relationship:

She’s like the friend you always connect with, the one who catches you up on her life; you know, the one you can confide in. She’s down to earth, a real natural. When she talks, don’t just listen. You want to listen. She’s like the friend you trust, the one you know has good taste. You stick with a girlfriend like that, you know.<sup>205</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> “The best presentation of popular conservatism since Barry Goldwater’s *Conscience of a Conservative*,” Frank Wilson in *The New York Times Book Review* quoted on the book cover of Limbaugh’s second book *See I Told You So*.

<sup>201</sup> Janice Peck, *The Age of Oprah: Cultural Icon for the Neoliberal Era*, (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2008), 180.

<sup>202</sup> Peck, *The Age of Oprah*, 180; Kate Picket, “Brief History: Oprah’s Book Club,” *Time*, September 26, 2008, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/arts/article/0,8599,1844724,00.html>; Richard Lacayo, “Media: Oprah Turns the Page,” *Time*, April 15, 2002, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1002228,00.html>

<sup>203</sup> Stephen Braun, “The Oprah Seal of Approval,” *Los Angeles Times*, March 9, 1997, accessed August 18, 2012. [http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-09/entertainment/ca-36226\\_1\\_oprah-winfrey-show](http://articles.latimes.com/1997-03-09/entertainment/ca-36226_1_oprah-winfrey-show)

<sup>204</sup> “Girlfriend” is a typical term among African-Americans.

<sup>205</sup> Maryann Koehl, Oprah Winfrey fan, quoted in Braun, “The Oprah Seal of Approval.”

Limbaugh has a very similar relationship with his audience. He is always polite and courteous to his callers, who in addition to asking about his opinion on politics, also ask for personal advice. Shortly after the drug scandal broke, Limbaugh received a call from a woman who was asking about what she could do for a friend in trouble. “You have a friend who’s an addict?” Limbaugh asked. The caller responded that she did and wanted to know “what strengthens someone?” “Are you ready to listen?” Limbaugh asked. “I want you to know something now. You are not responsible for what your friend does.”<sup>206</sup> If Winfrey acted as the “nation’s girlfriend,” Limbaugh is perhaps a “cool buddy” to his fans.

### “The Magic Bullet”

According to Roger Ailes, CEO of the *Fox News Network*, it all comes down to “likeability.” A person who is well liked “gets away with” much more than a person who is not liked. Limbaugh became friends with Ailes in 1990 when he was invited into the inner elite circles of the Republican Party. Prior to the mid-1990s Ailes was a television producer and a political consultant. He helped Richard Nixon recreate himself as the “new” Nixon in 1968 and coached both Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush during their presidential campaigns. Ailes arranged for a meeting between Limbaugh and President George H. W. Bush during his reelection campaign, in the hopes that Bush would benefit from Limbaugh’s popularity. Ailes was also the producer and instigator behind Limbaugh’s television show in 1993. In his 1988 book *You are the Message*, Ailes argues the importance of the “like factor.”<sup>207</sup>

If you could master one element of personal communications that is more powerful than anything we’ve discussed, it is the quality of being *likeable*. I call it the magic bullet,

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<sup>206</sup> Steinberg, “Limbaugh Signs On Again, Sharing Life’s Tough Lessons.”

<sup>207</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 158-171; David Beckwith, “The Republicans; The Man behind the Message,” *Time*, August 22, 1988, accessed August 18, 2012.  
<http://www.time.com/time/subscriber/article/0,33009,968180-1,00.html>

because if your audience likes you, they'll forgive just about everything else you do wrong. If they don't like you, you can hit every rule right on target and it doesn't matter.<sup>208</sup>

He continues by identifying different key factors in "likeability": "Do not be a victim," is one of them, which reflects back on how Limbaugh spoke to his audience right after it became known he was addicted to drugs. Other likable traits are: having genuine concern for other people, being an optimist rather than a pessimist, being polite, and "realize that somebody else can use a lift" once in a while. Based on the fact that Ailes and Limbaugh are friends and former colleagues, it is plausible that Ailes spoke to Limbaugh about the importance of the "like factor" in Limbaugh's career.<sup>209</sup>

Limbaugh is often portrayed as a likeable person by journalists who interview him. In a 1993 portrait article in the *New York Times* by Maureen Dowd called "At dinner with: Rush Limbaugh; A Shy, Sensitive Guy Trying to Get By in Lib City," Dowd described Limbaugh as a blushing "hopeless romantic" looking for love:

But oddly enough, beneath the bombast, there beats the heart of a romantic, the shy high school guy who rarely went on dates, the child of the 60's who has never owned a pair of blue jeans and the insecure college dropout and couch potato who has survived two bad marriages and some lonely stretches in the wonderful world of New York dating.<sup>210</sup>

His employees, many of whom have stayed with him for nearly twenty-four years, also speak kindly of him. He is known to be an extremely good tipper, and generous with his money. James Golden, Limbaugh's call screener and sometimes side kick, told Limbaugh's biographer, Zevs Chafets, that when he started working for Limbaugh in 1988, he at one point broke down in

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<sup>208</sup> Roger Ailes with Jon Kraushar, *You Are the Message: Secrets of the Master Communicators*, (Homewood: Dow Jones-Irwin, 1988), 69.

<sup>209</sup> Ailes and Kraushar, *You Are the Message*, 69-75.

<sup>210</sup> Maureen Dowd, "At Dinner With: Rush Limbaugh; A Shy, Sensitive Guy Trying to Get By in Lib City," *New York Times*, March 24, 1993, accessed June 4, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1993/03/24/garden/at-dinner-with-rush-limbaugh-a-shy-sensitive-guy-trying-to-get-by-in-lib-city.html?pagewanted=all&src=pm>

tears at work. He was broke and did not have enough money to pay his bills. The next day Limbaugh handed him an envelope with five thousand dollars in it. “Rush wasn’t rich then,” Golden told Chafets. Five thousand dollars was a lot of money to him, ‘This is a gift, not a loan’, he said, and didn’t mention it again.”<sup>211</sup> Limbaugh is also rarely attacked by people in his own party. This is, of course, due to his role as an opinion leader, but might also reflect on his off-air persona. If Limbaugh is well liked, sociable, a good friend, it would be harder to go against him.<sup>212</sup>

On air, Limbaugh is ruthless towards his enemies. To his callers, and off air, he is polite and well mannered. While this contrast might be appealing to his audience in itself, it also helps Limbaugh in easing over the various scandals he has been involved in over the years. When Limbaugh addresses his audience as “friends” and “folks” while simultaneously brutally attacking his opponent it gives a clear sense of “us” and “them.” Limbaugh’s fans know that it is not they that he is angry at; he remains their trusted companion and friend.

## Conclusion

Rush Limbaugh was born into a prosperous family where politics played an important part in everyday life and his political opinions echo those of his family. Yet Limbaugh’s childhood experiences were not all easy. He was insecure and an indifferent student under the constant scrutiny of his father. Radio became Limbaugh’s refuge. Although his father disapproved, Limbaugh saw radio as a mean through which he could become one of the “cool” kids.

While struggling to be a successful disc jockey, Limbaugh continued to develop his radio persona. A new form of disc jockeying emerged in the 1970s which influenced Limbaugh. In

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<sup>211</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 174-175.

<sup>212</sup> Zev Chafets, “Late-Period Limbaugh,” *New York Times*, July 6, 2008, accessed January 11, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/06/magazine/06Limbaugh-t.html?pagewanted=all>

addition, Limbaugh cites Muhammad Ali as a strong influence on the character he displays in public. Limbaugh “struck gold” and became immensely popular in the 1990s. His controversial right-wing political satire hit a nerve with the audience and he was welcomed with open arms by the elite in the Republican Party. Still, success was not what Limbaugh imagined it to be, and he was hurt by the rejection of his peers in the media.

Limbaugh has had his share of personal problems which has reinforced his standing among his listeners. He resembles media mogul Oprah Winfrey in this matter. Limbaugh is brutal when attacking his opponents on air, but appears to be well-mannered towards his staff and in public. This feature, known as the “likeability-factor” contributes to his appeal.

## Chapter Four: The Rush Limbaugh Show

The premise for Rush Limbaugh's public persona is his show: "The show must always come first," he writes in *The Way Things Ought to Be*.<sup>213</sup> His main purpose is to entertain, but he does so with his strong conservative views. Limbaugh was at the right place at the right time when he started getting national attention in the mid-1980s. He benefitted from a continuing expansion in mass media and his show has contributed into developing the trend in delivering news as entertainment, as well as being an important factor in the rise of political media. In this chapter I examine Limbaugh's show in general, but with an emphasis on how he sounds. Furthermore, I explore if Limbaugh is a propagandist, and finally I look at his listeners.

### Developments in American Broadcasting

*The Rush Limbaugh Show* was the beginning of a surge in conservative media. Until 1987, the 1949 Fairness Doctrine required licensed broadcasters to present public issues in a manner that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regarded as "honest, equitable and balanced."<sup>214</sup> The Fairness Doctrine became a rallying point for the GOP who maintained that what the commission regarded as examples of honesty, equity, and balance were in fact liberal opinions. In the 1980s the Reagan administration argued that the Fairness Doctrine was based on left-wing prejudice, violating the First Amendment right to free speech and in August 1987, the FCC abolished the Fairness Doctrine.<sup>215</sup> The Democratic majority in Congress fought to restore the doctrine, but Reagan vetoed the bill.<sup>216</sup> One year later Rush Limbaugh began his national program.

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<sup>213</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 28.

<sup>214</sup> Chafetz, *An Army of One*, 85;

<sup>215</sup> Steven F. Hayward, *The Age of Reagan: The Conservative Counterrevolution 1980-1989*, (New York: Crown Forum, 2009), 586, 587.

<sup>216</sup> Christopher H. Sterling and John Michael Kittross, *Stay Tuned: A History of American Broadcasting*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2002), 737, 738.

Since the 1990s, conservative media have become more visible with the *Fox News Network* as its biggest actor. The nationally syndicated *Rush Limbaugh: The Television Show* was produced by Roger Ailes, who is now the CEO of *Fox News Network*. Limbaugh's television show was a market test for Ailes, who had been planning for a conservative television channel since the 1970s.<sup>217</sup> When the show became a success, Ailes decided to go ahead with his plan.<sup>218</sup>

In his 1992 book, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, Limbaugh described his own show like this:

[A] unique blend of humor, irreverence, and the serious discussion of events with a conservative slant. Nowhere else in the media today will you find all these ingredients in one presentation. I would love to tell you that this was the result of a brilliantly conceived and flawlessly executed strategy, but it wasn't. It was just me being myself. I like to have fun, I like being irreverent, and I am dead serious about the things I feel passionately.<sup>219</sup>

Limbaugh was a pioneer in presenting news as entertainment. In addition to growth in political media, the "pseudo news" genre has been rising steadily with numerous web sites and television shows like Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* and Stephen Colbert's *The Colbert Show*. Limbaugh was at the right place at the right time, but his success is also due to the expansion in mass media, which in turn led to a specialization process resulting in niche programming.

Limbaugh is credited for single-handedly reviving the AM band which had lost ground to the FM band since the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>220</sup> The differences between AM and FM consists largely of formatting. Typical FM stations play varieties of popular music, while AM stations

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<sup>217</sup> "Roger Ailes' Secret Nixon-Era Blueprint for Fox News," June 30, 2011, *Gawker.com*, accessed August 5, 2012. <http://gawker.com/5814150/roger-ailes-secret-nixon-era-blueprint-for-fox-news>

<sup>218</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 60.

<sup>219</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 21.

<sup>220</sup> Kurtz, "The Rush Hour," 231.

have become noted for talk and news.<sup>221</sup> Limbaugh redefined talk radio, and today almost all political talk radio is found on the AM band.<sup>222</sup>

### *The Rush Limbaugh Show*

An early feature article in the *New York Times* describes how Limbaugh works and sounds:

Clippings spread before him, Limbaugh jokes, rants, blusters, chuckles, sometimes bursts into song or mimicry or boohoos. Last spring, when the women of Mills College tearfully protested the admission of males, Limbaugh broke down in mock sobs every time he thought about it, which was often.<sup>223</sup>

Limbaugh is extremely repetitive, but his audience never gets tired of hearing the same lines over and over again. Journalist Lewis Grossberger observed how Limbaugh, like George Wallace, is unable to hold his hands still while he is talking, which adds a certain rhythm to his speech:

Unlike most radio talkers, who affect a casual intimate style, Limbaugh sounds like he's on a soapbox. He is intoxicated by words, especially those flowing from his own lips. His vocabulary is extensive; his diction tends to the grandiosely formal, though overblown to the point of self-parody. His nervous energy plays out through hands that never stop moving. They rattle the papers, slap the desk, punch the console. Whap! Whap! Whump! This muted percussion is often heard on the air, a rhythmic accompaniment to Limbaugh's voice.<sup>224</sup>

Limbaugh's rhetoric is unique. He has perfected balancing indignation and megalomania into a seamless performance. For three hours a day, Limbaugh choreographs several dozen registers of huffiness and outrage into a tightly woven presentation of the day's news.<sup>225</sup>

To Grossberger, Limbaugh sounded like an odd combination of Teddy Roosevelt, Willard Scott, and an old Jackie Gleason character named Reginald Van Gleason III.<sup>226</sup> On the radio, even a few seconds of silence sounds a lot longer. Limbaugh, who has practiced his disc

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<sup>221</sup> Sterling and Kittross, *Stay Tuned*, 637.

<sup>222</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 123, 124.

<sup>223</sup> Grossberger, "The Rush Hours."

<sup>224</sup> Grossberger, "The Rush Hours."

<sup>225</sup> Land, "Sitting in Limbaugh." 235.

<sup>226</sup> Grossberger, "The Rush Hours."



jockey chatter since adolescence, knows this. To keep his flow going, he speaks in “headline” sentences and then repeats the main argument, before he moves on. If he loses his train of thought, he keeps talking; often just repeating one word – he is never quiet.

The rawness of Limbaugh’s language on air stood in sharp contrast to the language of politicians and broadcasters in the early nineties. Limbaugh addressed his listeners directly with expressions like “my friends,” “you,” “I,” “we,” and “watch folks.” He would ask his listeners direct questions on air like: “Would you do that?” In his 1994 book, *Media Matters*, John Fiske compared Limbaugh’s impact on his audience to the one of an unedited home video tape. The rawness and the sometimes loss of focus gave Limbaugh an unmatched authenticity.<sup>227</sup>

Radio is an intimate medium that affects people on a subjective level. People listen to radio when they are by themselves, so the more personable the host is, the better it works. The communication is speaker to listener, person-to-person. The “dark room” effect of the radio gives the words a richer meaning.<sup>228</sup> Today, however, the radio is often on in the background while the listener is otherwise preoccupied. This context has changed how radio disc jockeys communicate to reach the audience. When asked why he hired Rush Limbaugh, former president of *ABC Radio*, Ed McLaughlin said: “If you’re driving and things are distracting, it’s easy to tune out. I found myself not tuning out with Rush.”<sup>229</sup>

*The Rush Limbaugh Show* has stayed true to its format since it first appeared in 1984. The program airs live, and consists of Limbaugh’s own monologues based on current events, combined with parodies, phone calls from listeners, and a selection of running comedy bits.

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<sup>227</sup> Fiske, *Media Matters*, 30, 31.

<sup>228</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man; Critical Edition*, ed. W. Terrence Gordon, (Corte Madera: Gingko Press, 2003), 404, 405.

<sup>229</sup> Grossberger, “The Rush Hours.”

Limbaugh rarely features guests on his show. One of Limbaugh's favorite slogans is that he is his own guest. Still, once in a while a politician or political commentator will appear on his broadcast, most often to let the guest benefit from Limbaugh's popularity, not the other way around.

Limbaugh's guests reflect his position in the Republican Party. Among those who have appeared on his show have been former President George H. W. Bush, during his re-election campaign in 1992, former Vice President Dick Cheney has appeared on the show several times, as well as former President George W. Bush, in addition to former Secretary of State Colin Powell, former Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, and former Federal Reserve Chairman Alan Greenspan.<sup>230</sup>

If Limbaugh for some reason is unavailable, various stand-in guests host his show. Often the guest hosts have their own radio show, or they have been offered one after hosting Limbaugh's show a certain number of times. The guest hosts include Republican strategist Mary Matalin, former White House Press Secretary for President George W. Bush Tony Snow, and President George W. Bush's Chief of Staff, Karl Rove. At one point Limbaugh even let liberal news anchor and political commentator Chris Matthews host the show, but due to negative fan reaction this only occurred once.<sup>231</sup>

Much of Limbaugh's staff have stayed the same through the entire run of the show.

*The Rush Limbaugh Show's* most visible staff member is "Bo Snerdley" or sometimes just

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<sup>230</sup> "The Rush Limbaugh Show: Notable Guests," *Wikipedia.org*, accessed September 6, 2012. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rush\\_Limbaugh\\_Show#Notable\\_guests](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rush_Limbaugh_Show#Notable_guests); Andrew Seifter, "President Bush Was a Guest on His 'Good Friend' Rush Limbaugh's Show," *Mediamatters.org*, August 31, 2004, accessed September 6, 2012. <http://mediamatters.org/research/2004/08/31/president-bush-was-a-guest-on-his-good-friend-r/131765>; Kurtz, "The Rush Hour," 235.

<sup>231</sup> "The Rush Limbaugh Show: Stand-ins for Limbaugh," *Wikipedia.org*, accessed September 6, 2012. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The\\_Rush\\_Limbaugh\\_Show#Stand-ins\\_for\\_Limbaugh](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rush_Limbaugh_Show#Stand-ins_for_Limbaugh)

“Snerdley.” “Snerdley” is a pseudonym Limbaugh invented when he was operating as “Bachelor Jeff” Christie. “Snerdley” was the name he used for supposed listeners who would write or call in, usually professing to be big fans and part of what was called the “Christie Nation.” Today “Snerdley” is the name Limbaugh uses for his call screeners, both male and female. However, “Snerdley” is also the pseudonym for a particular staff member who is the show’s official “program observer” and call screener. “Bo Snerdley’s” real name is James Golden. Golden has been working for *The Rush Limbaugh Show* since the show first went national in 1988.<sup>232</sup>

After President Obama was elected, Golden who is African-American was appointed by Limbaugh as the show’s Official Criticizer of Barack Obama: “certified black enough to criticize.” These segments are written and performed by Golden. In addition to President Obama, “Bo Snerdley”/Golden also sometimes criticizes other African-American political activists such as Al Sharpton and Jesse Jackson.<sup>233</sup>

Limbaugh uses music and musical parodies to emphasize his arguments and further ridicule his subjects. A particular themed song such as “Ain’t Got No Home” by Clarence “Frogman” Henry is played to introduce a story about homeless people.<sup>234</sup> Limbaugh has been collecting “signature music,” music that overlaps segments and commercial breaks, since the 1970s. Limbaugh’s signature music consists of classic hits from the 1960s to the 1980s corresponding with the taste of his audience. He takes pride in his collection.<sup>235</sup>

A musical parody with a catchy melody can be played numerous times over the years, as opposed to a monologue. Limbaugh’s team will rework a classic hit and add new lyrics. The

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<sup>232</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 175.

<sup>233</sup> Chafets, “Late-Period Limbaugh.”

<sup>234</sup> Grossberger, “The Rush Hours.”

<sup>235</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 157.

parodies are performed by voice humorist Paul Shanklin and are usually sung in the voice of President Obama, Al Sharpton, Al Gore, or former President Clinton. A favorite on Limbaugh's show is "We Hate the USA," a remake of Lee Greenwood's classic evergreen "God Bless the USA." The parody is supposedly sung by "The Democratic Crew" which consists of all the voices of the people mentioned above. Limbaugh favors melodies from the folk music genre, to further ridicule the left, and has done several parodies based on the songs of folk singer Bob Dylan.<sup>236</sup>

### "Show Prep"

International broadcast consultant, Valerie Geller, maintains in *Creating Powerful Radio* that preparation is the key to a successful radio show:

It is *never* an accident when a show is number one. It takes very hard work. The best personalities compile a stack of material from various sources: articles from magazines or newspapers, written ideas, and material collected from the Internet along with stories they have picked up from life or have observed.<sup>237</sup>

Geller, who actually used to work with Limbaugh during his first years in New York, describes Limbaugh as a "master of show prep" and a disciplined radio host. According to Geller, "Rush would come in hours before each show. He didn't go on the air until he'd gone through dozens of newspapers, discussed ideas with his producer, and spent time on the phone talking to anyone from disc jockeys to political leaders."<sup>238</sup>

Limbaugh boasts on the air about the time he spends preparing for each show. Today, the Internet provides a wide range of updated news sources, making "show prep" easier than before. Limbaugh's "show prep" is posted on the show's website [www.rushlimbaugh.com](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com) under the

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<sup>236</sup> "We Hate the USA: The Democratic Crew Reworks Lee Greenwood's Classic," accessed September, 15 2012. <http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/videos?uri=channels/456319>

<sup>237</sup> Valerie Geller, *Creating Powerful Radio: Getting, Keeping & Growing Audiences: News, Talk, Information & Personality: Broadcast, HD, Satellite & Internet*, ed. Turi Ryder, (Amsterdam: Elsevier Focal Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>238</sup> Geller, *Creating Powerful Radio*, 96; Italics appear in the original text.

headline “Rush’s Stack of Stuff,” a section which is highlighted on the site. One of the main arguments against *The Rush Limbaugh Show* is that, along with other conservative media, it creates an “echo chamber” – an “echo chamber” which is constantly reinforced as new types of media develop (for instance Internet blogs). The notion behind the argument is that the conservative media feed each other with news sources and thus other ideological perspectives are kept out of the circulation. The most prominent media outlets in this “echo chamber” are the *Fox News Network*, the editorial pages in the *Wall Street Journal*, and *The Rush Limbaugh Show*.<sup>239</sup> Regarding Limbaugh’s “show prep,” the “blogosphere” he relates to is overwhelmingly conservative. Under the online newspapers and broadcasts section there is a more diverse selection. All the conservative media are represented (*Fox News Network*, *The New York Post*, *Washington Times* etc.), in addition to some who are perceived as liberal (*New York Times*, *Washington Post*), some “neutral” (*Real Clear Politics*), and a few foreign online newspapers. Likewise, Limbaugh’s monologues are also posted on his website, both in the form of a transcript and in audio. Links to the articles, or television segments, which are being discussed or referred to, are posted under each monologue.

Limbaugh has been accused by critics as well as scholars of being a propagandist. The combination of Limbaugh’s sheer relentlessness, and the fact that his show contains no contradiction to his political message, makes his style resemble propaganda. Propaganda promotes ideology through mass communication while concealing sources of ideas, the goal of the sources, the other side of the story, and the persuasive techniques that are being used. Propaganda aims at uniformity of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors. Traditionally the eight most commonly used propaganda techniques have been: “name calling” (labeling

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<sup>239</sup> Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 42.

something or someone with a name that evokes a negative response), “glittering generalities” abstract language highly charged with emotions and cultural values), “transfer” (the act of creating an association of ideas or images that result in the characteristics of one entity attaching, in public opinion, to another entity), “testimonial” (a device known from advertising in which celebrities, or people the target audience may identify with, provides support for an ideology), “plain folks” (a tactic used to convince the audience that public figures or groups they represent are not well trained, shrewd, and manipulative, but are just “plain folks” like you and me), “card stacking” (using a selection of facts to build an overwhelming case on one side of the issue, while concealing or diminishing other sides or points of view on the issue), “stereotyping” (a practice of using descriptive language to portray certain groups of people as universally having certain physical, mental, or character traits), and “bandwagon” (an appeal to join the behavior of what are alleged to be a large group of people behaving in a certain way who, it is presumed, must all be right).<sup>240</sup>

More recently more modern techniques have been added to this list. These practices include repetition of the same dogmatic assertions in the same similar language over and over, creating a sense of guilt, creating and relieving tension against a disliked group, projection of one’s own characteristics onto someone else, appealing to the need to compensate for one’s failure, appealing to the need for self-fulfillment or personal achievement, even if by association, reinforcement of an existing attitude, creating a sense of isolation or aloneness, creating a sense of being lost in a crowd, oversimplification of ideas and choices, fallacious reasoning – often skipping a step in the logic of an argument, and integration by suggestion of cause-based behaviors in society.

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<sup>240</sup> William N. Swain, “Propaganda and Rush Limbaugh: Is the Label the Last Word?,” *Journal of Radio Studies*, 6:1 (1999), 27-40 accessed May 15, 2012. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/19376529909391706>

There is no doubt that Limbaugh uses some of these propaganda techniques on his show. A study conducted in 1999 revealed that Limbaugh openly uses the traditional techniques of “card stacking,” “name- calling,” and “stereotyping.” Of the modern propaganda techniques, Limbaugh used repetition, simplification of choices, creating or relieving tension, and the reinforcement of existing oppositions. However, he is not found to use the majority of traditional or modern propaganda and persuasion techniques.<sup>241</sup> Concealing aims, sources, and techniques is an important part of the practice of propaganda. With reference to his “show prep,” Limbaugh was not found to conceal his identity, the source of ideas, the goal of the source, the persuasive techniques being used, and there was no evidence that Limbaugh concealed the other side of the issue.

### The Listeners

Limbaugh’s fans are referred to as “Dittoheads.” The term stems from an episode that occurred only a few weeks after Limbaugh’s show was nationally syndicated. A female caller expressed her complete agreement with every statement Limbaugh made, by simply answering “ditto.” After that, his fans eagerly started to label themselves as “Dittoheads.” On the show, the term is used as a timesaver. Instead of spending valuable time with Limbaugh on the line, praising him, callers just say “ditto.”<sup>242</sup> A typical greeting from a caller is: “Hello, Sir, thank you for having me on your show. Mega dittos from Athens, Georgia.”<sup>243</sup>

Before the Internet revolution, call-in radio acted as an alternative to the traditional, passive transmitter/receiver model of broadcasting. By inviting listeners to actively engage and

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<sup>241</sup> Swain, “Propaganda and Rush Limbaugh.”

<sup>242</sup> Streitmatter, “Rush Limbaugh: Leading the Republican Revolution,” 207.

<sup>243</sup> “Why Didn’t Dodd-Frank Prevent JP Morgan Chase Loss?,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, May 18, 2012, accessed September 6, 2012.

[http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/05/18/why\\_didn\\_t\\_dodd\\_frank\\_prevent\\_the\\_jpmorgan\\_chase\\_loss](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/05/18/why_didn_t_dodd_frank_prevent_the_jpmorgan_chase_loss)

participate in a public forum, call-in radio was an early example of what is today referred to as a “social medium.”

Limbaugh does not do “combat radio” or “caller bashing” which are radio industry terms for the host insulting his callers.<sup>244</sup> Limbaugh was hired as “caller bashing” disc jockey early in his career, but has repeatedly stated that he did not like it. He is always very polite to his callers. The callers, however, are carefully screened. He will also take fewer calls than what is the standard on comparable radio programs. The largest segments of the show are always Limbaugh’s right-wing monologues. The caller’s main purpose is to make Limbaugh look good, but the caller needs also to be interesting. Limbaugh “plays” callers like a disc jockey plays hit songs:

The primary purpose of callers on my show is to make *me* look good, not allow for a forum for the public to make speeches. I, after all, am the reason people listen. [...] Two minutes of a boring caller is the same as playing a record nobody likes. What do you do when a song you don’t like is played? You go looking for a song you like.<sup>245</sup>

This refers to Limbaugh’s professionalism and once again points to him being an entertainer first and foremost and a political activist second.

Limbaugh’s audience is predominantly male. A survey conducted by *Pew Research Center* in 2009 shows that 72 percent of Limbaugh’s listeners are men. This makes his show a male bastion compared to all other print or broadcast news-related media. Talk radio, as a genre, and *National Public Radio* (NPR) both had 58 percent male listeners. Fully 80 percent of Limbaugh’s regular listeners identified themselves as conservatives, 7 percent were moderate, and 10 percent were liberal. In comparison 60 percent of the viewers who watch the *O’Reilly*

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<sup>244</sup> Lewis Grossberger, “The Rush Hours.”

<sup>245</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 21; Italics appear in the original text.



*Factor* regularly were conservative. Although it must be noted that the *O'Reilly Factor* has a far greater reach than Limbaugh's radio show, being a nightly cable news- related program.<sup>246</sup>

Limbaugh's listeners scored quite well on the news quiz which was included in the survey to measure knowledge about public affairs. 36 percent had what was considered as a "high knowledge" about public affairs (national average was 18 percent). Among the *O'Reilly Factor's* viewers, 28 percent scored high on the news quiz. The media users with the best result in the test were the readers of the two magazines the *New Yorker* and *The Atlantic* (the two magazines were one category) who had a 48 percentage of "high knowledge." The outcome of the test reflected the participants' college education - 33 percent of Limbaugh's listeners had a college degree, while 54 percent of the *New Yorker/Atlantic* readers were college graduates. Among NPR's listeners 54 percent had college degrees, and among the *O'Reilly Factor's* viewers, 38 percent. The national average is 28 percent according to the survey. According to the survey 49 percent of Limbaugh's listeners were over the age of 50, compared to 41 percent of the users of news related media.<sup>247</sup>

A 2010 survey from *Pew Research Center* showed that a stable 5 percent of Americans listen to *The Rush Limbaugh Show*,<sup>248</sup> while 7 percent watch Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show*, and 10 percent watch the *O'Reilly Factor*. Among Republicans, 13 percent listened to Limbaugh regularly, whereas 17 percent of those who consider themselves to be conservative Republicans

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<sup>246</sup> "Limbaugh Holds onto his Niche – Conservative Men," *Pew Research Center Publications*, February 3, 2009, accessed June 11, 2012. <http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1102/limbaugh-audience-conservative-men>

<sup>247</sup> "Limbaugh Holds onto his Niche – Conservative Men."

<sup>248</sup> The percentage of Americans who listens to Limbaugh has remained unchanged since 2006.

tuned in on a daily basis. Not surprisingly, only 2 percent of registered Democrats listened to Limbaugh, and among the Independents the number is 4 percent.<sup>249</sup>

## Conclusion

*The Rush Limbaugh Show* was the beginning of a new era in American broadcasting. When the Fairness Doctrine was no longer upheld, Limbaugh's show marked the start of a rise in infotainment and in political media. Rush Limbaugh is also solemnly credited for reviving AM radio which stood in danger of disappearing due to the popularity of the FM band.

Limbaugh sounded fresh and unique when he first appeared on the national airwaves in 1988. While his performance had elements of the style originally associated with politicians of earlier times, like George Wallace, a major part of his appeal was that he sounded unscripted and authentic. In a time where people's relationship with radio was changing, Limbaugh stood out, and thus did not become background noise. Call-in radio is an active medium, rather than passive, therefore call-in radio can be said to be an early example of what is today referred to as a "social medium."

"Show Prep" is a highlighted section on the show's website, and Limbaugh often boasts on the air about how much time he spends preparing before each show. A recurring argument against *The Rush Limbaugh Show* is that it takes part in a conservative media "echo chamber" in which other news sources are ignored. Limbaugh's "show prep" indicates that in fact Limbaugh researches from a broad ideological spectrum, before presenting his view. Limbaugh openly uses both traditional and modern propaganda techniques, but is not found to use the majority of these methods.

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<sup>249</sup> "Ideological News Sources: Who Watches and Why," *Pew Research Center Publications*, September 12, 2010, accessed June 11, 2012. <http://www.people-press.org/2010/09/12/section-1-watching-reading-and-listening-to-the-news/>

*The Rush Limbaugh Show* remains a male bastion in American media, with 72 percent of its listeners being men. Limbaugh presents the news as entertainment, but studies show that his audience has a good knowledge of public affairs. Of registered Republicans, 13 percent listens to Limbaugh. Among conservative Republicans the number is 17 percent.

## Chapter Five: Political Activism

Rush Limbaugh has made numerous statements that he is just an entertainer.<sup>250</sup> However, those who have been the victim of Limbaugh's wrath on the air might disagree. Limbaugh is a comedian, but he also spreads the Republican Party's message and attacks those who he considers to be opponents. In this chapter I will discuss Limbaugh's political activism. First, I look at Limbaugh's political influence during the Clinton presidency. Second, I will address why Limbaugh, in spite of being controversial, is rarely criticized by members of his own party. Third, I look at Limbaugh's most effective method, and finally, I take a closer look at how Limbaugh deals with the subject of African-Americans and women on his show.

### Political Influence

Limbaugh is not an original political thinker. As Jeff Land notes, "The content of his political message is unremarkable."<sup>251</sup> For the most part he echoes his father's right-wing conservative doctrines. He is a firm believer in Reaganism, and considers Ronald Reagan to be the greatest president of the twentieth century.<sup>252</sup> Still, like many conservatives, Limbaugh is part libertarian, but this does not always come out on the air. He regards homosexuality as, most likely, biologically determined. While he opposes gay marriage as culturally subversive, he is not against gay civil unions. He drinks alcohol, smokes cigars, and is not exactly a shining example of Christian family values. He is not opposed to capital punishment, but told biographer Zev Chafets that "he wouldn't go to the mat over it."<sup>253</sup>

There are different opinions about Limbaugh's actual political influence, but political commentators give him credit for the 1994 congressional election. Limbaugh was at the height of

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<sup>250</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 20.

<sup>251</sup> Land, "Sitting in Limbaugh," 235.

<sup>252</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 71.

<sup>253</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Chafets, *An Army of One*, 98.

his career with his regular radio show, a nightly cable network television show, two bestselling books, and a sold out tour. According to Limbaugh himself he foresaw an opportunity to seize control of the House of Representatives for the first time since the 1950s. His strategy was to take the election national. Limbaugh's audience at the time provided the Republican Party the means to reach into almost every congressional district in the country with a unified message. Although the "Dittoheads," as Limbaugh's fans are known, were unable to determine presidential elections, they were strong enough to nominate conservative candidates and help them beat Democrats in much smaller congressional districts.<sup>254</sup>

Two months before the election Limbaugh said: "Historians will remember 1994 as a watershed year in American politics."<sup>255</sup> The day before the election, Limbaugh issued a call to action, urging all "Dittoheads" to be "ready at dawn tomorrow"<sup>256</sup> to gain Republican control of Congress. The Republican wins were sensational. The Party went from 176 seats to 230, enough to take control of the House of Representatives. The Democratic Speaker, Tom Foley, was defeated in his own district, and Newt Gingrich became the first Republican Speaker since Joseph Martin in 1953.<sup>257</sup>

The media named Limbaugh as the winner. The *New York Times* referred to the election in an article headlined "The Victory Rush,"<sup>258</sup> and the *Washington Post* wrote: "The talk radio election – a campaign in which anger and alienation has echoed across the airwaves – came full circle yesterday as conservative hosts did rhetorical high fives. To the strains of James Brown's 'I Feel Good,' Rush Limbaugh switched on his 'gloat-o-meter' and proceeded, well, to gloat."

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<sup>254</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 76, 77.

<sup>255</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 77.

<sup>256</sup> Streitmatter, "Rush Limbaugh – Leading the Republican Revolution," 212.

<sup>257</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 80.

<sup>258</sup> Frank Rich, "Journal; The Victory Rush," *New York Times*, November 27, 1994, accessed April 24, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/11/27/opinion/journal-the-victory-rush.html>

The *Washington Post* continued by saying: “The bombastic conservative hailed ‘one of the most massive shifts to the right in *any* country in *any* year since the *history of civilization*. This was a personal, political and ideological refutation and repudiation of the most amazing attempt to move this country to the left we’ve seen in 50 years.”<sup>259</sup> The *San Francisco Chronicle* followed suit by calling the newly elected Republicans the “Dittohead Caucus,”<sup>260</sup> and the *Detroit News* said, “We ascribe the turnabout to Mr. Limbaugh’s phenomenal hold over the minds of men (and, yes, women too).”<sup>261</sup>

In early December the same year, the majority held a victory dinner with Limbaugh as the main speaker. The newly elected legislators presented Limbaugh with an honorary membership in the “freshman class” and a “Majority Maker” pin that was given out to first term representatives. Six Republican women gave their own special tribute, by offering a plaque that said “Rush was Right” before they proudly announced: “There’s not a femi-Nazi among us.”<sup>262</sup> Barbara Cubin, from Wisconsin, told Limbaugh that because 74 percent of the nation’s newspapers had endorsed Democrats, “talk radio, with you in the lead, is what turned the tide.”<sup>263</sup> Vin Weber, cochairman of the Empower America conservative think tank, said that people who listened to ten or more hours of talk radio every week voted Republican three-to-one.

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<sup>259</sup> Howard Kurtz, “Talk Radio Hosts, Waking Up on the Right Side of the Bed,” *Washington Post*, November 10, 1994, quoted in Streitmatter, *Rush Limbaugh – Leading the Republican Revolution*,” 213; Italics appear in the original text.

<sup>260</sup> Edward Epstein, *The Mouths That Roared*, *San Francisco Chronicle*, December 25, 1994, quoted in Streitmatter, *Rush Limbaugh – Leading the Republican Revolution*,” 213.

<sup>261</sup> “The Rush of the Year,” *Detroit News*, December 30, 1994, quoted in Streitmatter, *Rush Limbaugh – Leading the Republican Revolution*,” 213.

<sup>262</sup> Streitmatter, “Rush Limbaugh – Leading the Republican Revolution,” 213.

<sup>263</sup> Katharine Q. Seelye, “Republicans Get a Pep Talk from Rush Limbaugh,” *New York Times*, December 12, 1994, accessed August 21, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/12/12/us/republicans-get-a-pep-talk-from-rush-limbaugh.html>

Weber concluded: “Rush Limbaugh is as responsible for what happened as any individual in America.”<sup>264</sup>

Limbaugh’s real influence lays in his ability to translate the Republican Party’s message into “blue-collar” language. Limbaugh’s central theme in everything he has done over the last two decades is that ordinary, hardworking, God-fearing Americans are being disrespected by the liberal establishment. When Limbaugh’s show went national in 1988, he filled a vacuum for millions of conservatives who felt that the major newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks were speaking a different political language.<sup>265</sup> Viewers could watch their favorite politicians in televised debates, but these were quick “sound-bites.” Limbaugh, by contrast, had the microphone to himself for three hours every afternoon. He had time to articulate a philosophy, to skewer the left, and to reassure his like-minded listeners, without contradiction or interruption. He seldom had guests and when he took calls he treated the callers with respect. He called the men “sir.” Limbaugh did not only speak the working-class’ language, he was also their trusted friend and companion.

Limbaugh’s appeal among the blue-collar voters was almost immediately recognized by the strategists in the Republican Party. George H.W. Bush was asked to try to imitate Limbaugh’s style and was given a tape of “Limbaughisms” to use for practice. In June 1992, Limbaugh spent the night in the Lincoln bedroom at the White House. To show his admiration, the president insisted on carrying Limbaugh’s bags upstairs himself. Limbaugh was flattered and called friends and relatives to brag about where he was sleeping. The whole incident was a

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<sup>264</sup> Seelye, “Republicans Get a Pep Talk from Rush Limbaugh.”

<sup>265</sup> Kurtz, “The Rush Hour,” 230.

political PR stunt by former Republican strategist, and now CEO of Fox News, Roger Ailes, in the hope that Limbaugh's popularity would rub off on Bush.<sup>266</sup>

Limbaugh's ideas were taken seriously. Six weeks before the 1994 election, Newt Gingrich and a group of Republicans issued a document called "Contract with America." It offered a legislative program that the candidates promised would be passed within one hundred days if they were elected into the House of Representatives. The Contract demanded a balanced federal budget, a tough anti-crime package, a prohibition on welfare payments to mothers under the age of eighteen and a requirement that able-bodied recipients go to work, a cut in financial support to the United Nations, tax adjustments and cuts for small businesses, and a "family values" legislation that would provide incentives for adoption, discourage abortion, increase parental control of education, and enact tougher anti-pornography laws. Many of these ideas were in Ronald Reagan's 1985 State of the Union speech, but George H.W. Bush had set them aside. Limbaugh was not directly involved in drafting the Contract, but his argumentation for reviving the spirit of Reaganism was an important inspiration for the manifesto. Karl Rove has said that: "Rush was talking about the elements of the 'Contract with America' before there was one."<sup>267</sup> During a tribute to Rush Limbaugh by the House Republicans in October 2001, then Majority Whip Tom DeLay went even further and said, "Rush Limbaugh did not take his direction from us, he was the standard by which we ran. He was setting the standard for conservative thought. [...] This country owes so much to Rush Limbaugh. We can never thank him enough."<sup>268</sup>

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<sup>266</sup> Colford, *The Rush Limbaugh Story*, 164, 165.

<sup>267</sup> Karl Rove quoted in Chafetz, *An Army of One*, 77.

<sup>268</sup> "Tribute to Rush Limbaugh," *Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 107<sup>th</sup> Congress*, First Session 147:14, (United States Government Printing Office: Washington, 2001), October 16, 2001, accessed May 15, 2012. <http://books.google.no/books?id=TOQuu->



## The Clinton Years

During the summer of 1994, former President Clinton, much against his will, elevated Limbaugh's status from loudmouthed conservative radio host to a serious political player almost up on presidential level. Amidst the Whitewater affair, the faltering health care plan, and several other issues, the Clintons had been the main target on Limbaugh's show for months. Limbaugh was leading the charge by opening each show with a refrain about "America held hostage" combined with the number of days the Clinton administration had been in the White House. The phrasing was a play on the news show *Nightline*'s opening through the "Iranian Hostage Crisis" during the one-term presidency of Jimmy Carter. President Clinton became more and more frustrated, and during an interview in Atlanta, the President complained about "Rush Limbaugh and all this right-wing extremist media is just pouring out venom at us every day."<sup>269</sup> A few weeks later, in an interview with a radio station which carried Limbaugh's show, Clinton could no longer contain his anger:

Look at how much of talk radio is a constant, unremitting drumbeat of negativism and cynicism...I'm not frustrated about [Limbaugh's criticism] exactly, but I tell you I have determined that I'm going to be aggressive about it. After I get off the radio today with you, Rush Limbaugh will have three hours to say whatever he wants, and I won't get any opportunity to respond. And there's no truth detector. You won't get on afterward and say what was true and what wasn't."<sup>270</sup>

The Clinton – Limbaugh feud was front-page news everywhere. Limbaugh talked about nothing else on his radio show for days and dubbed himself "America's truth detector." By attacking Limbaugh by name, Clinton had upgraded him to nearly his own level. The idea that a single radio host had greater access to the public than the President of the United States, and his

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[1EpowC&pg=PA19962&lpg=PA19962&dq=tom+delay+%22tribute+to+Rush+Limbaugh%22&source=bl&ots=j1PhXmoGyZ&sig=khi9CABGsrr4OZ-cWhMNUJJGW1k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=MpJLULa0CsfR4QSQxYDoCA&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=tom%20delay%20%22tribute%20to%20Rush%20Limbaugh%22&f=false](http://1EpowC&pg=PA19962&lpg=PA19962&dq=tom+delay+%22tribute+to+Rush+Limbaugh%22&source=bl&ots=j1PhXmoGyZ&sig=khi9CABGsrr4OZ-cWhMNUJJGW1k&hl=en&sa=X&ei=MpJLULa0CsfR4QSQxYDoCA&ved=0CDIQ6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=tom%20delay%20%22tribute%20to%20Rush%20Limbaugh%22&f=false)

<sup>269</sup> President Clinton quoted in Kurtz, "The Rush Hour", 232.

<sup>270</sup> President Clinton quoted in Kurtz, "The Rush Hour", 232.

entire team, seemed absurd, but Clinton clearly at the time, was being neutralized due to the influence of Rush Limbaugh.<sup>271</sup>

It was not the first time Clinton and Limbaugh clashed together in verbal confrontation. On May 1, 1993, during the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner, the President tried to delegitimize Limbaugh as a racist. The dinner was held in the shadow of the tragic killing, by federal agents, of fifty-one members of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas. The massacre was an accident, but women and children had been burned to death, and the country was in uproar. Congressman John Conyers of Detroit, who is black, attacked Clinton's Attorney General Janet Reno's handling of the entire affair. Limbaugh came to her defense on the air. "Do you like the way Rush Limbaugh took up for Janet Reno?" Clinton asked the twenty-four hundred guests at the Correspondents' Dinner. "He only did it because she was attacked by a black guy." Clinton laughed and said: "He's here tonight, isn't he?"<sup>272</sup> Limbaugh was among the guests, and was furious by the assault. He demanded an apology from the White House, and got one, but Clinton's speech, which was nationally broadcasted on C-SPAN, remained on the air, and the sentiment that Limbaugh was a racist lingered.<sup>273</sup>

According to Zev Chafets, their feud was reinforced because Clinton and Limbaugh were so-called "natural enemies." They grew up in the same part of the country – Hot Springs, Arkansas, and Cape Girardeau, Missouri is almost equidistant from Memphis. But while Clinton had been making a political career from a modest background, Limbaugh had been moving in the opposite direction, leaving his upper middle-class background to work as an entertainer. Clinton

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<sup>271</sup> Kurtz, "The Rush Hour," 232.

<sup>272</sup> President Clinton quoted in Chafets, *An Army of One*, 85.

<sup>273</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 85.

was a product of the 1960s and the civil rights movement, while Limbaugh, despite being five years younger, represented the 1950s and the Eisenhower era.<sup>274</sup>

Clinton was the President of the United States, but Limbaugh had a medium through which he communicated with his audience three hours each day, fifteen hours a week. Much of Limbaugh's power was simply that he had contact with his audience every day. In the autumn of 1994, Limbaugh could be heard on 659 radio stations, while 225 cable networks aired his television show.<sup>275</sup> On top of this came the *Limbaugh Newsletter* and his two books. At the time, Limbaugh also regularly traveled the country with *The Rush to Excellence Tour* during the weekends.

After Clinton's speech at the Correspondents' Dinner, Limbaugh reacted with an even sharper anti-Clinton campaign. He centered his criticism on the Administration's signature legislative proposal, the Universal Health Care bill. Limbaugh praised the American health care system as the best in the world, and told his audience that Clinton was greatly exaggerating the number of the uninsured. He argued over and over again that the Clinton plan was merely a way for the government to gain control of a large part of the American economy, and seize the authority to force citizens to lead what "the liberal elite" regarded as a healthy lifestyle. Limbaugh himself weighed 300 pounds and was often photographed smoking cigars. The arguments Limbaugh used against Clinton's health care plan are the same as the ones he has been using against the Obama Health Care Reform. Limbaugh's claim is that Universal Health Care would mean "the biggest tax increase in the history of the world," and that it is a

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<sup>274</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 81.

<sup>275</sup> Seelye, "Republicans Get a Pep Talk from Rush Limbaugh."

“monstrous assault on [the American people’s] personal liberty and freedom.”<sup>276</sup> When the Clinton administration launched a bus tour to campaign for the Health Care bill, Limbaugh replied with a musical parody based on the Who’s “Magic Bus”, and updated his audience on the tour’s itinerary encouraging his followers to assemble and protest. Every day he satirized parts of the Clinton’s plan mockingly on the air. When the bill was defeated in 1994, Limbaugh took much of the credit for the result.<sup>277</sup>

Clinton found Limbaugh’s opposition infuriating. After the bombing in Oklahoma City, which killed one hundred and sixty-eight and injured six hundred and eighty, Clinton made statements where he seemingly attached Limbaugh to the violence. During a speech to a group of college students in Minnesota, Clinton began to speculate about the motives of the bombers:

We hear so many loud and angry voices in America today. [Their goal] seems to be to try and keep some people as paranoid as possible and the rest of us all torn up and upset with each other. They spread hate. They leave the impression, by their words, that violence is acceptable. [...] Those of us who do not agree with the purveyors of hatred and division, with the promoters of paranoia, we have our responsibilities, too.<sup>278</sup>

Clinton identified the promoters of paranoia as people who speak “over the airwaves.”<sup>279</sup>

Conservative columnist, and Nixon’s former speech writer, William Safire, accused Clinton for insinuating that “the Oklahoma bombing attack had been incited,” and that the phrase “over the airwaves” simply was a coded way of saying “conservative talk radio hosts.”<sup>280</sup> Many

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<sup>276</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in “Rush Limbaugh Rages against Supreme Court Health Care Ruling,” *Huffington Post*, June 28, 2012, accessed September 6, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/28/rush-limbaugh-supreme-court-health-care-tax-increase-history-world\\_n\\_1635267.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/06/28/rush-limbaugh-supreme-court-health-care-tax-increase-history-world_n_1635267.html)

<sup>277</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 86, 87.

<sup>278</sup> Todd S. Purdum, “Terror in Oklahoma: The President; Shifting Debate to the Political Climate, Clinton Condemns ‘Promoters of Paranoia,’” *New York Times*, April 25, 1995, accessed August 21, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/04/25/us/terror-oklahoma-president-shifting-debate-political-climate-clinton-condemns.html>

<sup>279</sup> Purdum, “Terror in Oklahoma: The President; Shifting Debate to the Political Climate, Clinton Condemns ‘Promoters of Paranoia.’”

<sup>280</sup> William Safire quoted in Chafets, *An Army of One*, 89.

commentators, however, agreed with Clinton. Dan Rather said: “Even after Oklahoma City, you can turn on your radio in any city and still dial up hate talk; extremist, racist, and violent from the hosts and those who call in.”<sup>281</sup> In the *Washington Post* syndicated columnist David Boder wrote:

The bombing shows how dangerous it really is to inflame twisted minds with statements that suggest political opponents are enemies. For two years, Rush Limbaugh described this nation as “America held hostage” to the policies of the liberal Democrats, as if the duly elected president and Congress were equivalent to the regime in Tehran. I think there will be less tolerance and fewer cheers for that kind of rhetoric.<sup>282</sup>

Limbaugh demanded an apology from Clinton after the speech in Minnesota, but did not get one.<sup>283</sup>

After the shooting involving Congresswoman Gabrielle Gifford in Arizona, similar questions were again raised: Does violent rhetoric cause violence? Some commentators argued that the hardening political discourse would lead to more violence, and blamed Limbaugh, Sarah Palin, and the *Fox News Network* for the development. The discussion about violent rhetoric is not new. In 1963, Martin Luther King claimed it was George Wallace’s rhetoric which caused members of the Ku Klux Klan to bomb a church where four young girls were killed.<sup>284</sup> It has never been proven, however, that the Oklahoma bombers (nor Gifford’s shooter) ever listened to

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<sup>281</sup> Dan Rather quoted in Bernhard Goldberg, “Here We Go Again...,” *BernhardGoldberg.com*, January 10, 2011, accessed June 12, 2012. <http://www.bernhardgoldberg.com/here-we-go-again/>

<sup>282</sup> David Boder, “Will the Oklahoma City Bombing Cause the Nation to Unravel,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 26, 1995, accessed September 8, 2012. [http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-26/news/9504260307\\_1\\_bombing-family-values-government-workers](http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-04-26/news/9504260307_1_bombing-family-values-government-workers) (Published by *Washington Post Writers Group*.)

<sup>283</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 89.

<sup>284</sup> Howell Raines, “Editorial Observer; The Murderous Era of George Wallace,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2000, accessed September 8, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2000/04/26/opinion/editorial-observer-the-murderous-era-of-george-c-wallace.html>

Limbaugh.<sup>285</sup> During the trial it became clear that that the trigger for the deed was the storming of the Branch Davidian compound.<sup>286</sup>

When Limbaugh is accused of being a racist, simply for attacking the Obamas, one does well to remember the satirical scrutiny under which he put the entire Clinton family when Bill Clinton was president. No one was spared, not even the Clinton's thirteen year old daughter, Chelsea Clinton. During an episode of Limbaugh's television show, Limbaugh said: "Socks is the White House' cat, but did you know there is also a White House dog," and held up a picture of Chelsea Clinton who was in her early teens.<sup>287</sup> After the controversy that followed, Limbaugh offered a halfhearted apology: "I don't need to get laughs by commenting on people's looks, especially a young child who's done nothing wrong. I mean, she can't control the way she looks. And we really, we do not do that on this kind of show."<sup>288</sup> When the debate continued about his unscrupulous remarks, Limbaugh apologized again: "That was a terrible thing... I apologize again. I – that's the third time the crew makes a mistake by showing you Millie the dog when I intended to show you Chelsea Clinton, and then I followed with that terrible story."<sup>289</sup> Most people agreed that it was especially sinister to ridicule an innocent child like that, but as long as he was entertaining and funny, the audience stayed with him.<sup>290</sup> An important factor in Limbaugh's appeal is the question of how far he will go. Limbaugh has no "behavioral

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<sup>285</sup> "Arizona Shooting: Looking Behind the Mug-Shot Grin," *New York Times*, January 15, 2011, accessed September 8, 2012. <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/16/us/16loughner.html?pagewanted=1&r=1>

<sup>286</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 89.

<sup>287</sup> Roxanne Roberts, "16 Candles for Chelsea," *Washington Post*, February 27, 1996, accessed March 31, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/national/longterm/inaug/players/chelsea.htm>

<sup>288</sup> "Rush Limbaugh's Last Six Apologies," *Buzzfeed.com*, March 3, 2012, accessed June 13, 2012. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeedpolitics/the-last-six-times-rush-limbaugh-apologized>

<sup>289</sup> Rush Limbaugh's Last Six Apologies."

<sup>290</sup> In 1988, Limbaugh said that Amy Carter, the daughter of former President Jimmy Carter, was "the most unattractive presidential daughter in the history of the country." See "Rush Limbaugh's Last Six Apologies," *Buzzfeed.com*, March 3, 2012, accessed June 13, 2012. <http://www.buzzfeed.com/buzzfeedpolitics/the-last-six-times-rush-limbaugh-apologized>

regulators” wrote *Vanity Fair*’s media critic, Michael Wolff, in 2009.<sup>291</sup> The ordinary “sacred cows” for other comedians, have not, to date, been able to weaken Limbaugh.

Early in 1998 a website called the *Drudge Report* broke the story of President Bill Clinton’s affair with his twenty-two-year old intern, Monica Lewinsky. The story had originally been offered to *Newsweek* who refrained from publishing it. For Limbaugh and Matt Drudge, the publisher of the *Drudge Report*, this was a story that was too good to pass up.<sup>292</sup> Clinton denied the affair, and to make matters worse for the Clintons, Hillary Clinton told Matt Lauer on the *Today Show* that the whole story was a “vast right-wing conspiracy” set out by people who had been “conspiring against [her] husband since the day he announced for president.”<sup>293</sup>

Limbaugh had presented “skits” and musical parodies based on Clinton’s personal affairs on his show, ever since the Gennifer Flowers scandal in the 1992 Clinton campaign. Paula Jones inspired “Hey, Paula” and “Mrs. Jones You’ve Got a Lovely Daughter,” sung by a Clinton sound-alike. Monica Lewinsky got “The Ballad of the Black Beret” (“DNA upon her dress / War’s declared on terrorists / Hundreds more rolled in the hay / But only one wore a black beret”), and “Mambo No. 5” became “Bimbo No. 5” (“A little bit of Monica, not my wife / A little Miss America on the side”) Hillary Clinton got a song, too, “Stood By My Man” (“Sometimes it’s hard to be missus Bill Clinton / Cleaning up the mess behind that man”).

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<sup>291</sup> Michael Wolff, “The Man Who Ate the G.O.P.,” *Vanity Fair*, May 2009, accessed March 14, 2012. <http://www.vanityfair.com/politics/features/2009/05/rush-limbaugh200905>

<sup>292</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 89.

<sup>293</sup> Hillary Clinton quoted in David Maraniss, “First Lady Launches Counterattack,” *Washington Post*, January 28, 1998, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/special/clinton/stories/hillary012898.htm>

Limbaugh reacted to the accusation of a “vast right-wing conspiracy” by selling coffee mugs with the statement printed on them.<sup>294</sup>

No president’s personal life had ever been so public before, and no president had ever been subjected to such persistent ridicule before, involving his whole family, three hours a day – fifteen hours a week, not counting Limbaugh’s television show.

Limbaugh’s power lays in the fact that he has access to a medium and a form which politicians normally do not have. Today’s politicians can appear in debates, write books, hold speeches, or write personal blogs, but none of them have the opportunity to spend three hours, uninterrupted, every afternoon, mocking their opponents. Limbaugh uses humor and monologues to attack whoever disagrees with him – tools his opposition most often do not have access to. The reason why he is feared by both Republicans and Democrats is that he does not have to submit to either formal or informal rules. He is not an elected official, he is loyal to the Republican Party, but he does not have to be. The only people Limbaugh has to answer to is his audience, and Limbaugh is an excellent showman. His reputation as the most popular radio host in America for more than twenty years is the best proof of this fact. In May 2009, after a series of controversial events, radio mogul John Stinton concluded that: “If you disagree with [Limbaugh], you have to confront him, and then it’s you against Rush. In that match, you simply can’t win.”<sup>295</sup>

### The Rush Effect

Four days after President Obama’s inauguration, Limbaugh went on his radio show and told his millions of listeners what his policy towards the new president was going to be. The *Wall Street*

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<sup>294</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 90,91.

<sup>295</sup> John Stinton quoted in Wolff, “The Man Who Ate the G.O.P.”



*Journal* had asked him to write four hundred words about his hopes for the new administration. Limbaugh told his audience that he did not need four hundred words: four was enough. “I hope he fails,” said Limbaugh. Limbaugh commented on his statement on the *Fox News Network* a couple of days later. “I would hope Obama would succeed if he acts like Reagan,” he said. “But if he is going to do FDR, if he’s going to do the new, New Deal all over, which we will call the raw deal, why would I want him to succeed?” Limbaugh explained on *Fox News Network* that Obama stood for everything he despised. “The fact that he is historic is irrelevant to me. [...] Two trillion in stimulus? The growth of government? I think the intent here is to create as many dependent Americans as possible, looking to government for their hope and salvation. [...] I shamelessly say, No, I want him to fail, if his agenda is far-left collectivism.”<sup>296</sup>

The Obama administration saw this statement as an opportunity to associate the Republican Party with Rush Limbaugh, as he was, and has always been, a controversial figure, also among his own. Now, Independents and moderate Republicans were scandalized by Limbaugh’s remarks. Even some conservatives thought that Limbaugh had finally gone too far. Less than a week after taking office, President Obama invited the Republican congressional leadership to the White House for what was publicized to be a summit meeting to mark the bipartisanship the new president had promised. Obama strongly urged the heads of the Republican Party to support his trillion-dollar economic stimulus package. He told them: “You can’t just listen to Rush Limbaugh and get things done.”<sup>297</sup>

This, according to Zevs Chafets, raised eyebrows all over Washington. For an American president to single out an individual in his first week was highly unusual. Obama was basically

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<sup>296</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 5.

<sup>297</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 6.

giving the Republican Party a choice. They could either choose collaboration, or they could continue the harsh partisanship from the Clinton years. The Obama administration was trying to weaken both parties by pitting the Republican Party against Limbaugh.<sup>298</sup>

A month later, in February 2009, Limbaugh was the key-note speaker at the annual Conservative Political Action Conference of the American Union Foundation (CPAC). The speech was nationally televised by *Fox News Network*, and Limbaugh referred to it as his first address to the nation. During the speech which lasted for eighty minutes, Limbaugh repeated that he wished that Obama failed. The following day, Obama's Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel argued on CBS's *Face the Nation* that Limbaugh, more than any other contemporary political figure, was the leader of the Republican Party. Emanuel was asked specifically who, in his opinion, spoke for the Republican Party, and Emanuel said:

You just named him: it is Rush Limbaugh. He has laid out his vision, in my view. And he said it clearly. I compliment him for that. He's been very up front and I compliment him for that. He's not hiding. He's asked for President Obama and called for President Obama to fail. That's his view. And that's what he has enunciated. And whenever a Republican criticizes him, they have to run back and apologize to him and say they were misunderstood. He is the voice and the intellectual force and energy behind the Republican Party. He has been up front about what he views and hasn't stepped back from that, which is he hopes for failure. He said it and I compliment him for his honesty. But that's their philosophy that is enunciated by Rush Limbaugh and I think that's the wrong philosophy for America. [...] He was given the keynote basically at the [CPAC conference] to speak. When a Republican did attack him he clearly had a turn-around and comeback and basically said that he apologized and was wrong. I do think he's an intellectual force, which is why the Republicans pay such attention to him.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>298</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 6.

<sup>299</sup> Sam Stein, "Rahm on Rush: He's The Voice, Energy and Intellect of the GOP," *Huffington Post*, March 1, 2009, accessed May 15, 2012. [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/03/01/rahm-on-rush-hes-the-voice\\_n\\_170854.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2009/03/01/rahm-on-rush-hes-the-voice_n_170854.html)

Media critic, Howard Kurtz, wrote in the *Washington Post* a week later that Emanuel was deliberately provoking the Republican Party with this statement.<sup>300</sup>

The same evening the Republican Party Chairman and the leader of the Republican National Committee (RNC), Michael Steele, commented on Emanuel's statement on a CNN show called *D.L. Hughley Breaks the News*. The context of the interview was informal. During the interview, Hughley at one point stated that, to him, the Republican National Convention resembled Nazi Germany and that it seemed blacks were not welcome there, a statement Steele did not object to. When the conversation turned to Limbaugh, Hughley said: "Rush Limbaugh, who is the de facto leader of the Republican Party..." "No, he's not," said Steele cheerfully to the laughing audience. "I'm the de facto leader of the Republican Party." "Then you know what? Then I can appreciate that, but no...no one will...will actually pry down some of the things he says, like when he comes out and says that he wants the president to fail, I understand he wants liberalism to fail," said Hughley. "How is that different than what was said about George Bush during his presidency?" asked Steele. "Let's put it into context here. Rush Limbaugh is an entertainer. Rush Limbaugh, the whole thing is entertainment. Yes, it's incendiary, yes it's ugly..."<sup>301</sup>

Steele was essentially saying what Limbaugh had said many times of himself: that he is an entertainer who illustrates absurdity by being absurd. This episode demonstrates the uncertainty surrounding Limbaugh's role in the Republican Party. He gladly refers to himself as an entertainer, but was furious when Steele called him so. In spite of Steele being the chairman of the Republican National Committee, he was not considered to be an especially powerful or

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<sup>300</sup> Howard Kurtz, "GOP Fights Back Over Criticism Over Limbaugh," *Washington Post*, March 6, 2009, accessed May 22, 2012. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/05/AR2009030503770.html>

<sup>301</sup> "D.L. Hughley with Michael Steele and Chuck D," *YouTube.com*, March 2, 2009, accessed May 22, 2012. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kP7Ceh4h0KA>

outstanding politician. The general notion was that Steele, as a black citizen, was elected chairman mainly to figure as the Republican counterpart to Obama.

Media critic Michael Wolff described Limbaugh's impact, which he refers to as "the Rush effect," and the Steele incident like this:

Indeed, for twenty years, three hours a day, nothing in radio has moved the audience to action as Rush: the Republican base both buys the pre-owned cars he suggest ought to be bought and champions the causes he's hot on. Nothing in politics, or the news cycle, is as direct and powerful as this. In seconds, he can move an awesome tide, unleashing e-mail, telephone calls, and scary Web-site rage. Minutes after R.N.C. chairman Michael Steele tried to suggest to CNN that he, rather than Rush, was the bona fide leader of the party, Rush reached for comment, merely said he'd respond on the air – which must have sent a chill down Steele's spine.<sup>302</sup>

Limbaugh replied the following Monday on his show, with a monologue, which lasted for nearly twenty minutes, titled: "A few words for Michael Steele." Throughout the monologue Limbaugh indirectly threatened Steele to make sure his audience would put a hold on donations to the RNC. He started by saying:

Okay, so I am an entertainer, and I have 20 million listeners, 22 million listeners because of my great song-and-dance routines here. Yes, said Michael Steele, the chairman of the Republican National Committee, I'm incendiary, and yes, it's ugly. Michael Steele, you are head of the RNC. You are not head of the Republican Party. Tens of millions of conservatives and Republicans have nothing to do with the RNC and right now they want nothing to do with it, and when you call them asking them for money, they hang up on you. I hope that changes. I hope the RNC will get its act together. I hope the RNC chairman will realize he's not a talking head pundit, that he is supposed to be working on the grassroots and rebuilding it, and maybe doing something about our open primary system and fixing it so that Democrats do not nominate our candidates.<sup>303</sup>

Limbaugh continued by presenting himself as an innocent young boy, let down by the lack of loyalty and cruelty of others. Limbaugh described how *he* stood up and defended Steele, only to be betrayed by the chairman:

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<sup>302</sup> Wolff, "The Man Who Ate the G.O.P."

<sup>303</sup> "A Few Words for Michael Steele," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 2, 2009, accessed May 23, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/03/02/a\\_few\\_words\\_for\\_michael\\_steele](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/03/02/a_few_words_for_michael_steele)

My parents taught me when I was growing up that you always stood behind people who defended you, you never abandoned people who stood up for you and who defended you against assault. Michael Steele was a candidate for the Senate in Maryland. Michael Steele was on this program, he got airtime on this program to attempt to refute the lies being told about him by Michael J. Fox in those famous ads way back when that were also run against Jim Talent in Missouri. I personally took time to defend Michael Steele and to rip the substance of those ads, had him on the show. I went after Chuck Schumer when Chuck Schumer's former employee stole Michael Steele's private credit record information and released it. When I went to Washington a couple years ago for a personal appearance from my station there, WMAL, WMAL arranged for a number of dignitaries to meet me backstage. One of them was Michael Steele, who thanked me very much for coming to his defense. Something's happened. Now I'm just an entertainer and now I am ugly and my program is incendiary.

He continued by claiming that Steele and other politicians in Washington look down upon them, which is a well-known strategy by right-wing politicians:

And finally, Mr. Steele, we do like to entertain people here. The audience is very smart, sir. They know the difference between entertainment, and they know the difference between deadly serious issues that affect their country. Don't underestimate the intelligence of this audience or Republicans and conservatives generally. The biggest problem with all of you who live inside the Beltway is you look out over America and you think you see idiocy and unsophisticated people, ignorant people, and when you're looking at liberal Democrats, largely you're correct, but your own voters are every bit as informed, involved, engaged, and caring, if not more so than you are. We don't care, first and foremost, about the success of the Republican Party. We care about the United States of America and its future, because we cherish it and love it, and we know what it is that made it the greatest nation on earth, and we don't hear you articulating that you understand that, not just you, Mr. Steele, but hardly anybody else in Washington, DC. So send those fundraising requests out, and, by the way, when you send those fundraising requests out, Mr. Steele, make sure you say, "We want Obama to succeed." So people understand your compassion. Republicans, conservatives, are sick and tired of being talked down to, sick and tired of being lectured to, and until you show some understanding and respect for who they are, you're going to have a tough time rebuilding your party.<sup>304</sup>

Limbaugh concluded his speech by saying that Steele had fallen straight into Emanuel's trap, and that a conflict inside the Republican Party was exactly what the Obama administration wanted. To prove Emanuel's point, from a couple of days prior, Steele issued an apology to Limbaugh less than an hour after Limbaugh's monologue aired. "I respect Rush Limbaugh, he is a national

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<sup>304</sup> "A Few Words for Michael Steele."

conservative leader, and in no way do I want to diminish his voice,” said Steele in a written statement to the national media.<sup>305</sup>

Limbaugh is the only entertainer in America today, which holds this kind of power over a political party. Other Republican politicians have been forced to offer their apologies to Limbaugh. David Frum, George W. Bush’ former speechwriter described Limbaugh’s extraordinary role like this:

Among TV and radio talkers and entertainers, there is none who commands anything like the deference that Limbaugh commands from Republicans; not Rachel Maddow, not Jon Stewart, not Michael Moore, not Keith Olberman and his zenith. Democratic politicians may wish for favorable comment from their talkers, but they are not terrified of negative comment in the way that Republican politicians live in fear of a negative word from Limbaugh.<sup>306</sup>

*Vanity Fair*’s Michael Wolff, described the consequence of the “Rush effect.” Shortly after the war in Iraq began, Wolff was reporting from Qatar and asked an intemperate question of one of the military briefers in a daily televised news conference. Limbaugh took notice and accused Wolff of being unpatriotic on the air. Wolff received more than 20,000 e-mails in 48 hours, which caused his mail server to break down.<sup>307</sup>

During the speech Limbaugh gave to Michael Steele, he indirectly discussed his own role in the Republican Party today.

My colleagues in talk radio can attest to this next point. We get press release after press release after press release from the Republican National Committee attacking the Democrat agenda. They send us points of refutation. I never use them 'cause I don't need them. But they send out all these points of refutation about how this part of what Dingy Harry wants or Pelosi wants is wrong, is wrong, is wrong. Why are you sending out these

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<sup>305</sup> “GOP Chairman Steele Backs Off Limbaugh Criticism,” *CNNPolitics.com*, March 3, 2009, accessed May 23, 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2009/POLITICS/03/02/gop.steele.limbaugh/>

<sup>306</sup> David Frum, “Are We Being Fair to Rush Limbaugh?” *CNN.com*, March 6, 2012, accessed May 24, 2012. <http://edition.cnn.com/2012/03/05/opinion/frum-rush-limbaugh-fairness/index.html>

<sup>307</sup> Wolff, “The Man Who Ate the G.O.P.”

things, Mr. Steele? Why is your office sending out all these talking points to defeat the Democrat agenda in Congress if your position is you want it to succeed?<sup>308</sup>

And:

It's amazing how many Republican politicians contact this show wanting in on it. It's amazing how many Republicans want to come on this show. It's amazing how many send this show an endless number of press releases, their PR flacks are constantly sending me press releases and points, Congressman X saying this, special interest group X saying that, hoping I will mention it, hoping I will promote their cause.<sup>309</sup>

This did not only make Steele and his colleagues look foolish, showing the audience how politics works “behind the scene,” but it also gave an impression of how the politicians in the Republican Party work with Limbaugh. His role in the party is as an interpreter. The Republican Party wants him to translate their political proposals into a language which the voters understand and relates to. Limbaugh is a mixed blessing for the Republican Party; he is a showman and a satirist who has the capability to influence his audience while keeping them entertained, but he also has the power to turn his followers against certain politicians. Limbaugh’s political ideas are more right-wing conservative than the Republican Party in general, and he is constantly trying to move the Party to the right. He is not an official spokesperson and is not afraid of criticizing the politicians in his own party. He seems to rely on his own judgment, and operates more or less alone. He did not support Bob Dole or John McCain during the primaries in 1996 and 2008, but he always backs the Republican candidate during presidential elections. In an interview he described his position with a sports metaphor, “It’s like the Super Bowl. If your team isn’t in it, you root for the team you hate less.”<sup>310</sup>

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<sup>308</sup> “A Few Words for Michael Steele.”

<sup>309</sup> “A Few Words for Michael Steele.”

<sup>310</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 114.

## “Turning the Tables”

In defending conservative politicians and attacking liberals, “turning the tables” is a preferred method of Limbaugh, and the rest of the conservative media. In 2002, at a celebration of the hundredth birthday of Strom Thurmond, South Carolina Republican senator and former 1948 Dixiecrat presidential contender, Republican politician and presumptive Senate leader Trent Lott said, “I want to say this about my state, when Strom Thurmond ran for president, we voted for him. We’re proud of it. And if the rest of the country would have followed our lead, we wouldn’t have had all these problems over all these years either.”<sup>311</sup> Mississippi is regarded as the state with perhaps the most racist history, and Lott’s speech soon caught the media’s attention.

When the discussing the matter on his show, Limbaugh stated that, “What Lott said is utterly indefensible and stupid. I don’t even want to explain it.”<sup>312</sup> The statement was widely quoted in the media, and regarded as proof that the Republican Party was distancing itself from Lott. The following days, however, Limbaugh presented evidence of the “double standard” in the media on his show. First, Democratic senator Robert Byrd, who used to be a member of the Ku Klux Klan, held a leadership position in the Democratic Party and was not condemned when he made “comments about white n-words.” Second, Democrats had greater guilt for segregation than Republicans, but bore less responsibility for it. For example, “Al Gore’s father voted against the Civil Rights Act in 1964 as a senator from Tennessee.” Third, Democrats have used insensitive language and not suffered the criticism or penalties suggested for Lott. Specifically, “we can’t forget Fritz Hollings and his comments about African Americans being cannibals.”<sup>313</sup> Limbaugh repeatedly closed any argument about the liberal “double standard” with a disclaimer saying that he was not protecting Trent Lott, “This is not to defend Trent Lott, but when you’re

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<sup>311</sup> Trent Lott quoted in Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 21

<sup>312</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 24.

<sup>313</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 25, 26.



going to be all high and mighty and claim somebody should resign for impropriety, you'd better not be dirty yourself." And, "I'm not trying to excuse Lott here in any way, but there's a double standard here that gives the impression that Republicans are inclined toward racism when the fact of the matter is the segregationists in the United State Senate are Democrats."<sup>314</sup> This is a key factor in Limbaugh's method. Instead of defending Lott, Limbaugh "turns the tables" and argues that the Democratic attack on the Mississippi Senator was hypocritical and that the mainstream media coverage showed that conservatives are held to a higher standard, and that the mainstream media has a clear liberal bias.

When Republican presidential candidate, Mitt Romney, was accused of being a bully in high school by the *Washington Post*,<sup>315</sup> Limbaugh used similar rhetoric:

This is what I know. Mitt Romney was not at Chappaquiddick. Mitt Romney has not been accused of rape. Mitt Romney did not have an affair with a mob babe. He didn't have an affair with an actress who committed suicide later on. Mitt Romney did not father a child out of wedlock. Mitt Romney did not support the tapping of Martin Luther King's phone. Mitt Romney was never a member of the Ku Klux Klan. Mitt Romney did not lie about his law school grades. Chappaquiddick is Ted Kennedy. Accused of rape is Bill Clinton. Affair with the mob babe and an actress, John Kennedy. Didn't father a child out of wedlock, that's John Edwards and Democrats too numerous to mention. Didn't support the tapping of Martin Luther King's phone, that's Robert Kennedy. Never a member of the Ku Klux Klan, that's Robert Byrd. Didn't lie about his law school grades, that's Joe Biden. All Democrats, and all of those Democrats did those things well after high school. And Obama even wrote in his book *Dreams from My Father* how he bullied a young girl. And he hasn't even apologized. Grab audio sound bite number six. The audio book version, *Dreams from My Father*, originally published in print, by the way, 1995. Then-Senator Barack Obama in his book said this about a time he bullied a young classmate named Coretta.<sup>316</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> Rush Limbaugh quoted in Jamieson and Cappella, *Echo Chamber*, 28.

<sup>315</sup> Jason Horowitz, "Mitt Romney's Prep School Classmates Recall Pranks, But Also Troubling Incidents," *Washington Post*, May 10, 2012, accessed May 24, 2012. [http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mitt-romneys-prep-school-classmates-recall-pranks-but-also-troubling-incidents/2012/05/10/gIA3WOKFU\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/mitt-romneys-prep-school-classmates-recall-pranks-but-also-troubling-incidents/2012/05/10/gIA3WOKFU_story.html)

<sup>316</sup> "What Mitt Romney Hasn't Done," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, May 11, 2012, accessed May 24, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/05/11/what\\_mitt\\_romney\\_hasn\\_t\\_done](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/05/11/what_mitt_romney_hasn_t_done)

As is evident from the example, Limbaugh will “hold on to” any disclosed incident about a Democratic politician to prove a point or an argument later on. Again, he does not defend Romney, but rather points his finger at “the other side” instead.

### “The Magic Negro” and “Feminazis”

Charges of racism have followed Limbaugh throughout his entire career. In the early seventies, in the character of “Bachelor Jeff” Christie, Limbaugh famously told a black caller to: “Take that bone out of your nose and call me back.” In the late 1990s, Limbaugh said on the air that: “Have you ever noticed how all composite pictures of wanted criminals resemble Jesse Jackson?” And in 2003 he was dismissed from the announcing crew for ABC’s Television *Monday Night Football* when he made what was perceived as a racist attack on Philadelphia Eagles quarterback Donovan McNabb. Limbaugh laughed when a caller said her young daughter remarked that Barack Obama looked like the cartoon character Curious George. He later apologized on the air, saying that he did not know that Curious George was a monkey.<sup>317</sup>

Limbaugh officially regards Black Nationalism and black liberation theology as separatist. He opposes affirmative action as a racial quota system, and sees multiculturalism as an effort to undermine a national American identity.<sup>318</sup> These are the perspectives of a traditional white integrationist and are views that are shared by many conservatives. This is his view on African-Americans gathered from his first book *The Way Things Ought to Be*:

Of course, the argument is that black Americans are different from all other groups. They didn’t choose to come here; their ancestors were brought here in slave ships. I won’t deny that, nor will I defend this country’s original sin. But there is nothing we can do about it now. It may not be fair, but we can’t change the past. Black Americans are here. The only solution, as I said, is for blacks to be treated as Americans, to be taught the things they

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<sup>317</sup> “Rush Limbaugh Plays the Race Card,” *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education*, 60 (2008), 39, accessed May 8, 2012. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40407171>

<sup>318</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 176.

need to know as Americans, and to be held to the same standards as other Americans. I realize that my suggestion that we encourage assimilation rather than alienation is easier said than done. But an overhauling of our attitudes toward one another, so as to de-emphasize rather than to emphasize our cultural differences, will do far more in the long run to advance the plight of minorities, than will the artificial remedy of reverse discrimination.<sup>319</sup>

This perspective is at best insensitive and lacks empathy, but it is not racist.

Limbaugh's viewpoint on race and minorities is the one of a white middle-class conservative male. He often uses examples from his childhood when accused of racism. When first arriving in New York in the late eighties, Limbaugh was rumored to be an anti-Semite. It has never been confirmed that he made anti-Semitic statements on the air. (Claiming that he was the victim of a campaign, he promised a reward of one million dollars to anyone who could prove that he was anti-Semitic. The reward has never been collected.) When defending himself from the accusation, Limbaugh told the audience that it was impossible for him to be an anti-Semite, because his next door neighbors when he was growing up were Jewish. If anything, it was the Limbaugh family who had been the victim of prejudices. When his younger brother David Limbaugh fell in love with the Jewish daughter next door, she had not been allowed by her family to date him, because he was not Jewish.<sup>320</sup>

After being accused of racism against the Obamas, Limbaugh told his audience of his family's black maid when he was growing up:

I told him about our maid that came in two or three times a week named Alberta. We called her Bertie. She was like a grandmother to my brother and me, and my mom and dad. My mother took her home and I'd drive in the car. I'm six or seven years old. I saw where Bertie lived and it made me sick. I talked to my parents about it. I said: "Why does this happen?" They sat me down and they talked to me about the circumstances. It was my father that enabled Bertie to buy a house outside of that neighborhood and get a job at

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<sup>319</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 208.

<sup>320</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 51, 52.

... I think it was at Woolworth's. I'm telling [this journalist] all this stuff and I don't know if it's registering at all – and I'm frankly angry I have to tell it. I'm angry that I have to say this stuff.<sup>321</sup>

The audience imagines Limbaugh as an innocent boy, overshadowing the indecency of using a story about one's black housekeeper as an argument against presumed racism.

Nevertheless, Limbaugh is not a neutral political figure. After the second Rodney King trial in 1993, Limbaugh made a point on his television show to show his audience the seconds on the video tape that was used as evidence, right before King gets beaten up. King is seen as he gets up and tries to hit one of the police officers. Limbaugh's targets have always been and still are what he perceives as the "hypocritical left" and the "liberal media." What follows is part of a transcript from his television show:

And I want to tell you what you're going to see here. This is the beginning of the whole incident. This is when Rodney King has been got – has been asked to get out of the car. He's on the ground and the cops are surrounding him. I want you to see this and watch it. Surprised? You seen it before? Maybe a little, but you haven't seen it very much. Watch it again. Watch it some more times. We've got a lot of ground to make up here on this video. Watch this again, folks. Rodney King gets up off the ground and lunges at a cop – after being told to stay down. I'm convinced, if he'd have stayed down, nothing would have happened to him at that point; if he would have just submitted and had been handcuffed. But he gets up and lunges at the cop. And you haven't seen that. And what you don't see – if we had time we'd show you again. He tries to get up again. He doesn't lunge at the cop again, but he tries to get up again.<sup>322</sup>

After reviewing the Rodney King video tape online, it seems unnatural to focus on these couple of seconds of the tape. At one point it might look like King tries to stand up (it is unclear), but the brutality of rest of the tape is, by far, the dominating factor. It is hard to share Limbaugh's

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<sup>321</sup> "Desperate Liberals Cry Racism," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, September 14, 2009, accessed June 11, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/09/14/desperate\\_liberals\\_cry\\_racism](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2009/09/14/desperate_liberals_cry_racism)

<sup>322</sup> "Limbaugh on King, March 10, 1993," in Fiske, *Media Matters*, 131.

interpretation of the video tape.<sup>323</sup> While it is legitimate to make these two arguments (that it looks like King tries to hit the police officer, and that this was perhaps concealed from the public) Limbaugh adds an extra aspect because of who he is - a white conservative male. Limbaugh's goal is to advance dominant conservative male interests, and that goal increases the racial factor in for instance examples like the one above.

Civil rights activist Al Sharpton has argued that Limbaugh is much more intelligent with his "racial attacks" than his contemporary conservative radio and television hosts. After Limbaugh played a musical parody on his show called "Barack the Magic Negro" sung by an Al Sharpton sound-alike, Sharpton told the *New York Times* that "I despise the ideology, but Rush is a lot smarter and craftier than Don Imus. Limbaugh puts things in a way that he can't be blamed for easy bigotry. Some of the songs he does about me just make me laugh. But he's the most dangerous guy we have to deal with on the right including O'Reilly and Imus. They come at you with an axe. He uses a razor."<sup>324</sup>

"Barack the Magic Negro" is perhaps the most noted musical parody in the history of the show. It was presented for the first time during the primary elections in 2008, and has been featured regularly on the show ever since. Limbaugh used "Puff the Magic Dragon," a song made famous by folk group Peter, Paul, and Mary, as background for the song. "Barack the Magic Negro" was inspired by an article written by David Ehrenstein which caused a controversy when it was first published in the *Los Angeles Times*. The term "the magic Negro" refers to a character that sometimes appears in Hollywood productions. The "magic Negro" is a black person whose main purpose in the storyline is to help the white lead character complete his

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<sup>323</sup> "Rodney King Beating Caught on Tape," April 28, 2009, *YouTube.com*, accessed May 11, 2012.  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uy-IIJCcGY>

<sup>324</sup> Chafets, "Late-Period Limbaugh."

mission. The “magic Negro” appears out of nowhere and does not have a problematic background related to the storyline. He or she is wise with an earthy kind of knowledge, and most likely has healing effect on the white community he or she encounters. Ehrenstein argued that then presidential candidate Barack Obama had many of these qualities since his father was from Kenya and his mother was white, and Obama therefore did not have slave ancestors. The underlying argument in Ehrenstein’s article was that Barack Obama would never have become president if he had been a descendant of slaves.<sup>325</sup>

Limbaugh read the entire article on air the day it was published, and two days later he introduced the musical parody, sung by an Al Sharpton sound-alike.

Barack the Magic Negro lives in D.C.  
The L.A. Times, they called him that  
'Cause he's not authentic like me.  
Yeah, the guy from the L.A. paper  
Said he makes guilty whites feel good  
They'll vote for him, and not for me  
'Cause he's not from the hood.  
See, real black men, like Snoop Dog,  
Or me, or Farrakhan  
Have talked the talk, and walked the walk.  
Not come in late and won!

Oh, Barack the Magic Negro, lives in D.C  
The L.A. Times, they called him that  
'Cause he's black, but not authentically.  
Some say Barack's "articulate"  
And bright and new and "clean."  
The media sure loves this guy,  
A white interloper's dream!  
But, when you vote for president,  
Watch out, and don't be fooled!  
Don't vote the Magic Negro in –  
'Cause — 'cause I won't have nothing after all these years of sacrifice.<sup>326</sup>

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<sup>325</sup> David Ehrenstein, “Obama the ‘Magic Negro,’” *Los Angeles Times*, March 19, 2007, accessed June 3, 2012.  
<http://www.latimes.com/news/opinion/commentary/la-oe-ehrenstein19mar19,0,3391015.story>

<sup>326</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 156.

One of the songs intensions was to mock then Democratic candidate Joe Biden's observation that Obama was "clean" and "articulate," which Limbaugh argued were in fact racist remarks, and once again argued that there is a double standard when Democrats speak of race related issues.

The fact that Obama does not have a slave background has been the base of several "skits" on Limbaugh's show. Limbaugh constantly refers to Obama as Halffrican-American instead of African-American. After President Obama was elected, Limbaugh appointed his African-American assistant "Bo Snerdely" as the show's "Official Criticizer of Barack Obama for the EIB Network, certified black enough to criticize with a blend of imported and domestic one hundred percent fortified slave blood."<sup>327</sup> "Snerdely's" real name is James Golden. In the sketches about Obama Snerdely/Golden typically speaks with a "black accent." He often criticizes the Obamas on issues that are important to the African-American population, for instance in this segment where he condemns Michelle Obama for not mentioning in a national speech that African-Americans do not consider Fourth of July to be their Independence Day:

[L]ook, you are a strong black sister, yo, come from our culture, you were out there fronting like you Michelle Partridge, everything is cute. Come on you coulda told them, for instance, Fourth of July, yo man, we ain't down with that, July 15<sup>th</sup> is when we're free, but that don't mean we don't love America, everybody is down with this, you know? Okay, look, Michelle, you Obama's shorty, you got the slave blood, he don't. You supposed to understand what it is, you are supposed to break it down for us. What did you do? You were fronting, girl. Fake.<sup>328</sup>

Golden writes and performs these sketches himself. The appointment of Golden as "Official Criticizer of Barack Obama" is a good measurement of Al Sharpton's point that Limbaugh presents his sketches in such a way that he cannot be blamed for racism and bigotry.

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<sup>327</sup> Chafets, *An Army of One*, 159.

<sup>328</sup> James Golden quoted in Chafets, *An Army of One*, 162.

During the primary contest between Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama, Limbaugh launched a scam he called “Operation Chaos.” His goal was to prolong the destructive battle between the two Democratic candidates as long as possible in the hope that this would hurt the Democrats’ chances in winning the general election. The day before the Texas and Ohio primaries, he instructed his listeners in those states to go out and vote for Senator Clinton.

The strategy is to continue the chaos in [the Democratic] party. Look, there’s a reason for this. Obama needs to be bloodied up. Look half the country already hates Hillary. That’s good. But nobody hates Obama yet. Hillary is going to be the one to have to bloody him up politically because our side isn’t going to do it. Mark my words. It’s all about winning, folks!<sup>329</sup>

The next day Hillary Clinton won Texas and Ohio (although Obama took the caucus and won the delegate count, 99 to 94). The reports from Texas said that approximately 120, 000 Republicans had crossed over in the open primary and won it for Clinton. (Ohio does not have an open primary.) In the aftermath, the reasons why Clinton won were contradictory as there are many factors to consider in an election.<sup>330</sup> However, an article in *The Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* argued that Limbaugh, by launching “Operation Chaos” was “hiding his real goal [to] keep a black man from winning the presidency.”<sup>331</sup> It is important to remember when reviewing Limbaugh’s Obama inspired satire, the scrutiny under which he put President Clinton during the 1990s. Rather than racism being the main reason, it is more plausible that Limbaugh launched the scam simply because Obama was winning, and that he realized that Obama had a better chance of winning the presidential election than the Republican candidate John McCain.

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<sup>329</sup> “Why We Want to Keep Hillary Alive,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 3, 2008, accessed August 18, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/03/03/why\\_we\\_want\\_to\\_keep\\_hillary\\_alive4](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2008/03/03/why_we_want_to_keep_hillary_alive4)

<sup>330</sup> Jayson K. Jones and Ana C. Rosado, “Measuring the ‘Limbaugh Effect,’” *New York Times*, March 8, 2008, accessed August 18, 2012. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/03/08/measuring-the-limbaugh-effect/>

<sup>331</sup> “Rush Limbaugh Plays the Race Card.”



Limbaugh does not attack Barack Obama because of his race, but he uses race to attack Obama. Limbaugh's style and rhetoric is constantly outrageous and controversial, but the fact that he often says cruel remarks, does not mean that he is, in fact, not racist against President Obama. Limbaugh has created a racial ambiguity on his show, making the listener ask, "Is he, or isn't he?" Still, it is worth mentioning that Limbaugh sometimes makes some good arguments when singling out the racial double standard, hence for instance Joe Biden's remarks that Obama was "clean" and "articulate."

"Feminazi" is Limbaugh's term for feminists. Limbaugh strongly opposes the right to abortion and, what he refers to as "lesbian rights" which is one of Limbaugh's definitions of feminism. A "feminazi," explains Limbaugh, is:

[A] woman to whom the most important thing in life is seeing to it that as many abortions as possible is performed. Their outspoken reasoning is quite simple. Abortion is the single greatest avenue for militant women to exercise their quest for power and advance their belief that men aren't necessary. They don't need men in order to be happy. They certainly don't want males to be able to exercise any control over them. Abortion is the ultimate symbol of women's emancipation from the power and influence of men. With men being precluded from the ultimate decision-making process regarding the future of life in the womb, they are reduced to their proper, inferior role. Nothing matters but me, says the feminazi.<sup>332</sup>

To be sure, Limbaugh has also said that he believed that the original women's movement started out as a genuine effort to prove conditions, and that causes like "equal pay for equal work" were justifiable. "People had a right to be upset at the treatment some women received, and some of their activism and protest were understandable."<sup>333</sup> It was not until 1978 that the women's movement turned "militant and loud," and feminists became "Feminazis."<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>332</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 193

<sup>333</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 189.

<sup>334</sup> Limbaugh, *The Way Things Ought to Be*, 193.

Women remain one of Limbaugh's favorite targets on the air. He calls the National Organization for Women (NOW) a "terrorist organization" and refers to female professionals as "reporter-ettes" and "professor-ettes." One of his former policies on his show was to require female listeners to send him photos of themselves before he would answer their call on air. He made a similar request in perhaps the biggest controversy in Limbaugh's career to date.

On March 3, 2012, Limbaugh, issued a statement on his website saying that:

For over 20 years, I have illustrated the absurd with absurdity, three hours a day, five days a week. In this instance, I chose the wrong words in my analogy of the situation. I did not mean a personal attack on Ms. Fluke.

I think it is absolutely absurd that during these very serious political times, we are discussing personal sexual recreational activities before members of Congress. I personally do not agree that American citizens should pay for these social activities. What happened to personal responsibility and accountability? Where do we draw the line? If this is accepted as the norm, what will follow? Will we be debating if taxpayers should pay for new sneakers for all students that are interested in running to keep fit? In my monologue, I posited that it is not our business whatsoever to know what is going on in anyone's bedroom nor do I think it is a topic that should reach a Presidential level. My choice of words was not the best, and in the attempt to be humorous, I created a national stir. I sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for the insulting word choices.<sup>335</sup>

The story behind the apology was Limbaugh's attacks on student activist Sandra Fluke. Ten days prior to Limbaugh's issued statement, Fluke a Georgetown University law student, testified before an unofficial hearing convened by Democrats. She criticized the health insurance policies of Georgetown, which is a Jesuit university. According to Fluke, the school's lack of contraception coverage has a harmful impact on its female students. Fluke declared that she was "an American woman who uses contraception."<sup>336</sup> A conservative Internet blog wrote about the

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<sup>335</sup> "A Statement from Rush," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 3, 2012, accessed June 11, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/03/a\\_statement\\_from\\_rush](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/03/a_statement_from_rush)

<sup>336</sup> "Sandra Fluke's Testimony," *Law Students for Reproductive Justice*, February 23, 2012, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/statement-Congress-letterhead-2nd%20hearing.pdf>

story under the headline “Sex-crazed co-eds going broke buying birth control, student tells Pelosi hearing touting freebie mandate.”<sup>337</sup>

A week after Fluke’s testimony, Limbaugh singled out Fluke in several of his monologues, and called her a “slut” and a “prostitute.” Limbaugh claimed Fluke was asking for the government to subsidize her sex life. “What does that make her?” asked Limbaugh. “It makes her a slut, right? It makes her a prostitute. She wants to be paid to have sex. She’s having so much sex, she can’t afford contraception. She wants you and me and the taxpayers to pay for her having sex.” The next day, Limbaugh went even further. “If we are going to pay for your contraceptives, thus pay for you to have sex, we want something for it, and I’ll tell you what it is: We want you to put the videos online so we can watch.”<sup>338</sup>

Over the course of three days, Limbaugh insulted Fluke forty-six times.<sup>339</sup> David Frum, President George W. Bush’ former speech writer, said he could not recall anything “as brutal, ugly, and deliberate ever being said by such a prominent person and so emphatically repeated. This was not bad “word choice,” it was a brutally sexualized accusation, against a specific person, prolonged over three days.”<sup>340</sup>

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<sup>337</sup> Craig Bannister, “Sex-Crazed Co-Eds Going Broke Buying Birth Control, Student Tells Pelosi Hearing Touting Freebie Mandate,” *Cnsnews.com*, February 27, 2012, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://cnsnews.com/blog/craig-bannister/sex-crazed-co-eds-going-broke-buying-birth-control-student-tells-pelosi-hearing>

<sup>338</sup> Dan Whitcomb, “Rush Limbaugh Apologizes to Law Student for ‘Insulting’ Comment,” *Reuters.com*, March 4, 2012, accessed August 24, 2012. <http://mobile.reuters.com/article/topNews/idUSTRE8220T220120304>

<sup>339</sup> Todd Gregory and Chelsea Rudman, “Limbaugh Launched 46 Personal Attacks on Fluke; He Apologized for Two Words,” *Mediamatters.org*, March 5, 2012, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://mediamatters.org/research/201203050022>

<sup>340</sup> Frum, “Are We Being Fair to Rush Limbaugh?”

The day before Limbaugh's apology, President Obama called Fluke to express his support.<sup>341</sup> Republican politicians were more reluctant in their replies. Under pressure from Democratic lawmakers, a spokesman for House Speaker John Boehner said Limbaugh's comments were "inappropriate." Contender for the Republican nomination for president, Rick Santorum told CNN that Limbaugh was "being absurd," while future presidential candidate Mitt Romney said that "it was not the language he would have used." Several advertisers began to pull out of Limbaugh's show before he issued his halfhearted apology."<sup>342</sup>

Soon after Limbaugh's apology conservative political commentators began referring to instances where liberal comedians and media personalities have made misogynist statements.<sup>343</sup> The debate surrounding Limbaugh's remarks now included the question of if there is a double standard in the Democratic Party.

On his show, Limbaugh argued that his assaults on Fluke were unlike him, and that he had descended to "their level," by which he meant the Democrats.

Against my own instincts, against my own knowledge, against everything I know to be right and wrong I descended to their level when I used those two words to describe Sandra Fluke. That was my error. I became like them, and I feel very badly about that. I've always tried to maintain a very high degree of integrity and independence on this program. Nevertheless, those two words were inappropriate. They were uncalled for. They distracted from the point that I was actually trying to make, and I again sincerely apologize to Ms. Fluke for using those two words to describe her. I do not think she is either of those two words.<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Jonathan Weisman, "Obama Backs Student in Furor with Limbaugh on Birth Control," *New York Times*, March 2, 2012, accessed August 27. <http://thecaucus.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/03/02/boehner-condemns-limbaughs-comments/>

<sup>342</sup> "Rush Limbaugh vs. Sandra Fluke: A Timeline," *The Week*, March 9, 2012, accessed August 28, 2012. <http://theweek.com/article/index/225214/rush-limbaugh-vs-sandra-fluke-a-timeline>

<sup>343</sup> Kristen Powers, "Rush Limbaugh Isn't the Only Media Misogynist," *TheDailyBeast.com*, March 4, 2012, accessed September 1, 2012. <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2012/03/04/rush-limbaugh-s-apology-liberal-men-need-to-follow-suit.html>

<sup>344</sup> "Why I Apologized to Sandra Fluke," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 5, 2012, accessed August 21, 2012. [http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/05/why\\_i\\_apologized\\_to\\_sandra\\_fluke](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/05/why_i_apologized_to_sandra_fluke)

He maintained that his attack consisted of “two words” and that he was wrong to use them. He held up the notion that Fluke was wrong: “Georgetown paid for all of their other medical treatment, but it wouldn't pay for the birth control pills that these doctors prescribed should they be necessary – or so she says. We still don't know who any of these friends of hers are, these other women, and we don't know what happened to them.”<sup>345</sup> In the midst of the controversy, several newspaper articles reported that numerous companies were pulling their advertisements from Limbaugh's show. Commenting on this, Limbaugh told his audience that: “Don't worry folks; advertisers who don't want your business will be replaced,” and “they've decided that they don't want your business anymore.”<sup>346</sup>

The Limbaugh – Fluke episode, illustrates both Limbaugh's tactics and his influence. First, when discussing the story of Fluke's testimony in front of the Democratic Party, a testimony which was opposed by the Republican Party, Limbaugh “translates” high level party politics into “layman's terms.” He talks about the matter in a casual language, and presents the case from a conservative right-wing point of view. Limbaugh speaks directly to his audience: “What does that make her? It makes her a slut, right?” He creates a clear enemy line by referring to “us” and “them.” Second, Limbaugh's main strategy against opponents consists of verbal attacks and assaults. Limbaugh told his audience that he was “not being true to his nature” by attacking Fluke with such cruel remarks. This is not true. Limbaugh has based his career on similar attacks on mostly politicians, but also innocent private citizens such as thirteen year old Chelsea Clinton in 1993. Third, when President Obama chooses to involve himself in the

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<sup>345</sup> “Why I Apologized to Sandra Fluke.”

<sup>346</sup> “Don't Worry, Folks: Advertisers Who Don't Want Your Business Will Be Replaced,” *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, March 5, 2012, accessed August 21, 2012.

[http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/05/don\\_t\\_worry\\_folks\\_advertisers\\_who\\_don\\_t\\_want\\_your\\_business\\_will\\_be\\_replaced](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/03/05/don_t_worry_folks_advertisers_who_don_t_want_your_business_will_be_replaced)

controversy by expressing his support to Fluke, he elevates Limbaugh's status. By getting involved, Obama contributes to Limbaugh's importance in American public discourse. Finally, the Republican Party's leading politician's unwillingness to take a stand against Limbaugh points to his role as an opinion leader in the party.<sup>347</sup>

While Limbaugh's "racial attacks" are ambiguous and "intelligent," like some of the assaults on President Obama, Limbaugh's attacks on feminists are much more explicit and consistent. The offensive remarks against activist Sandra Fluke, in which he referred to her as a "prostitute" and "slut" and other demeaning terms, forty-six times over the course of three days is evidence of this. Yet, when accused of being a bigot, Limbaugh quickly "turns the tables," and claims that he is the victim of a double standard. Limbaugh often points to the Democratic Party's acceptance of Senator Edward 'Ted' Kennedy as proof for this double standard. Kennedy, according to Limbaugh, "got away with killing a woman."<sup>348</sup>

## Conclusion

Rush Limbaugh's rhetorical style resonates with millions of Americans. Limbaugh does not have the means to swing presidential elections, but in 1994, at the height of his career, Limbaugh was named as a determining factor when the G.O.P. had a big win in the mid-term election. He interprets the Republican Party's message into "layman's terms," and he does so without contradiction three hours a day. Accordingly, Limbaugh's appeal was almost immediately recognized by the strategists in the Republican Party when his show was nationally syndicated in 1988.

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<sup>347</sup> There is no record of this, but it is natural to assume that Fluke also received thousands of e-mails from Limbaugh's followers during the time of the feud.

<sup>348</sup> "Until Karma Gets Them, the Lib Media Will Always Portray Republicans as Rich Racists," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, August 29, 2012, accessed August 30, 2012.  
[http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/08/29/until\\_karma\\_gets\\_them\\_the\\_lib\\_media\\_will\\_always\\_portray\\_republicans\\_as\\_rich\\_racists](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2012/08/29/until_karma_gets_them_the_lib_media_will_always_portray_republicans_as_rich_racists)

With the expansion in mass media began a new reality for American politicians. For President Clinton, Limbaugh's constant opposition was infuriating. Limbaugh ridiculed not only Clinton's legislative proposals, but also his personal life – even the President's thirteen year old daughter. Clinton made efforts to diminish Limbaugh's stride, which only seemed to fire up the conservative base.

Limbaugh has an established medium to spread his message. The audience knows where to find him. Since he is comedian he uses a form elected politicians do not have access to. Limbaugh is a showman, but was furious when R.N.C chairman, Michael Steele labeled him as such. Steele was forced to apologize to Limbaugh, which points to the vagueness concerning Limbaugh's role inside the GOP.

Limbaugh's influence is simply called "the Rush effect." Michael Wolff recalled in an article for *Vanity Fair*, how he received 20000 e-mails in 48 hours after he had been called unpatriotic by Limbaugh on air. Wolff argued that "the Rush effect" is powerful, and that it is frightening to become the victim of Limbaugh's rage.

Should a Republican politician say or do something that could potentially hurt the GOP's standing with the electorate, Limbaugh performs a counterattack. He does not excuse the Republican politician, rather he points to mistakes made by Democratic politicians. Limbaugh will mention incidents that happened decades ago, and hold the Democratic Party responsible for not boycotting the politician in question, if that is the case.

Limbaugh has been accused of being a racist many times during his career. He has made several statements which have been perceived as racism. Nevertheless, while race is normally a

“sacred cow” for other comedians, Limbaugh has handled the matter in such an ambiguous way, that it is hard to pinpoint if he is in fact, racist.

From the very beginning Limbaugh has targeted feminism on his show. The rhetorical assaults on student activist Sandra Fluke show how vicious Limbaugh can be when he attacks. From a research point of view, the Fluke affair demonstrated Limbaugh’s impact and his methods. Limbaugh “interpreted” Fluke’s unofficial testimony before congressional Democrats into “layman’s terms” and brutally attacked Fluke because he disagreed with her. When President Obama got involved in the Limbaugh – Fluke feud, it points to Limbaugh’s impact as an opinion leader. Finally, the conservative media “turned the tables” and made it a question of misogyny among *all* talk show hosts, especially those who are considered as liberal, and argued that Limbaugh was the victim of a double standard.



## Chapter Six: Conclusion

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Rush Limbaugh, given his controversial style, is his long-lasting appeal and his ability to stay relevant. For over twenty years, Limbaugh has been the most listened to radio talk show host in America, as well as a powerful opinion maker. Like most Republicans, Limbaugh would never publicly acknowledge George Wallace's influence on the Republican Party's politics. Limbaugh regards Wallace as proof that it is the Democratic Party which has a history of racism and not the G.O.P.<sup>349</sup> All the same, there are many similarities between Wallace and Limbaugh: Wallace's instinct for media and politics strengthened his appeal, and it is safe to say that Limbaugh's career would not have lasted this long had he not shared the same qualities. Common to them both is also the aptitude for expressing conservative policies in a style and language which resonates with working-class voters. Limbaugh, like Wallace, has a public image as a "bad boy," someone who refuses to accommodate the current consensus. Furthermore Wallace's speeches had a strong element of entertainment in them, which made his style a predecessor to political entertainment as it is known today.

Historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. writes of Spiro Agnew that: "no one can question the force of Spiro T. Agnew's personality, nor the impact of his speeches, nor his Midas talent as fund-raiser for his party, nor his rare skill in rejoicing his friends, infuriating his enemies and confounding the press, nor his astonishing success in transmuting himself from a buffoon and bumbler, complete with malapropism and pratfalls, into a formidable political figure."<sup>350</sup> Agnew, similar to Limbaugh, was quickly recognized for his ability to appeal to the working- and middle-class constituency. Agnew deliberately combined humor with aggressive rhetoric in

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<sup>349</sup> "Democrat Congressman Says Tea Party Wants to Lynch Blacks," *The Rush Limbaugh Show*, August 31, 2011, accessed September 11, 2012.

[http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2011/08/31/democrat\\_congressman\\_says\\_tea\\_party\\_wants\\_to\\_lynch\\_blacks](http://www.rushlimbaugh.com/daily/2011/08/31/democrat_congressman_says_tea_party_wants_to_lynch_blacks)

<sup>350</sup> Schlesinger, Jr., "The Amazing Success Story of 'Spiro Who?'"

order to get his message through to the voters. All the while being “outsiders,” both Wallace and Agnew contributed to the shift in the tone in political rhetoric. In addition, their public images paved the way for a political entertainer like Rush Limbaugh.

Much of Limbaugh’s appeal is based in the ambiguity he surrounds himself with. He keeps the listeners questioning whether he is serious, or if it is all an act. Rush Limbaugh is above all an entertainer. He always keeps his eyes on ratings and revenue. He has made a career out of overstepping boundaries, but should he go too far, he quickly apologizes. He is not committed to a conviction, but rather his audience. He calls his audience “my friends,” and he treats them as such. Limbaugh portrays himself as a harassed conservative who strikes back at the “liberal oppression.” Another important factor in his long-lasting career is that he, when necessary, has shared personal information with the listeners. He has created an authoritative character, but at the same time he dares to be vulnerable. As a result his followers look up to him as well as identifies with him.

Limbaugh’s impact on the broadcasting media is indisputable; in many ways he defined political talk radio. After twenty-four years, Limbaugh remain an important player in conservative media. His television show was a market test for the *Fox News Network* which has become a significant actor in American public discourse. Since 1988, presenting news as entertainment has become a rising trend in broadcasting. Limbaugh was also one of the first actors to do political comedy on a national level. The genre of political entertainment is difficult to pin down. One minute it is comedy, the next minute it is a serious attempt of voter persuasion. While they may claim to be “merely comedians” there can be no doubt that Limbaugh and some of his peers have substantial political influence.

Limbaugh's impact is sometimes called "the Rush effect." The Rush effect" refers to Limbaugh's influence on his followers. According to Michael Wolff, nothing in the news cycle is as frightening and powerful as Rush Limbaugh.<sup>351</sup> With no apparent behavioral boundaries, Limbaugh attacks his opponents fifteen hours a week, in a form most of his opponents do not have access to. He controls his own medium, and is keenly aware of how he represents himself. The vagueness of his role, and of his style, has allowed him to date to dodge every bullet. The demise of Rush Limbaugh has been predicted many times, but he always manages to bounce back. After twenty-four years as a political entertainer his influence is still strongly felt.

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<sup>351</sup> Wolff, "The Man Who Ate the G.O.P."

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